

A Feisty
Bride for a
Broken Family
FELICITY
WELLS

A Feisty Bride For A Broken Family

A Clean Western Historical Novel

Contents

Copyright

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Protecting An Eastern Bride

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

A Thank You To My Reader

Copyright

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Mornings were never good, not anymore. The walk to work felt long and Annie was going to spend the entire day on her feet.

It was always that way. The world was a tough place when you remembered living in a better time.

Her body sagged as the first few raindrops hit her. It was so hard to stay pleasant.

No one had any obligation to her or her family, and she was grateful that she had been able to get a job.

She sighed as she walked by a small café. It was the kind of place she would have passed without noticing in her previous life, a little family place on the edge of the industrial district of Boston.

She had never been to this part of town before her family had lost everything. Now she was there every single day. It was still a little bit like walking in a strange dystopia.

Annie shook her head. She knew this line of thinking wouldn't get her anywhere.

It was a hard life, but it was life. She had to be grateful for that. After everything, at least they were still alive.

The small restaurant had large glass windows and a warm light spilled out. Inside, right next to the window, was a young family.

They seemed to be happy. The child wasn't old enough to be in school yet, and she seemed cheerful.

The world on the other side of that window was so strange.

She stopped and stared, watching as the daughter laughed and ate her breakfast.

Annie's mind made up the conversation that they were having, talking about all the happy moments they had shared together—happy moments playing and laughing and having a great time.

She sighed, trying to make herself turn away from the sight that filled her vision, but it was so hard. The little girl reminded Annie of herself, a blonde child with more hope than she could contain in her body.

Annie sent up a small prayer that the child would never have her heart broken by life. The girl deserved better than that. Everyone deserved better than that.

She imagined they were planning a trip to a nearby park. Annie wished she could go with them and enjoy some laughter and happiness.

She used to be able to laugh like that. It was such a strong memory that it nearly brought her to tears.

She didn't have that anymore, but when she was a young girl, her parents had that sort of joy on their faces. They used to go out to breakfast and laugh around a table, loving each other.

She remembered being happy, bouncing around in a house that old money had bought. But they had lost so much.

They were on the right side of the war, but it didn't stop their finances from being devastated by the not-so-civil engagements that nearly tore the country apart.

She sighed, dreaming of a different world, a place where things would be different.

She couldn't make the world better for herself. All she could do was work and try to make sure that her family didn't lose anything more.

Her golden hair was pulled up, braided, and wrapped around her head. Her brown eyes tore away from the window, focusing instead on the path ahead of her.

Her shift at the factory wouldn't wait for her to remember times she would never get back. Lateness was not appreciated and she needed every second of work she could find.

Her family wasn't rich anymore. She didn't have the luxury to sleep in or enjoy small moments like meals with her family.

Her family didn't do those sorts of things anymore. Her father and mother had become shells of who they once were.

It was a sad state of affairs. That was what everyone had said when her family fell from grace. Her name didn't have the value that it had had before.

She shivered, knowing her father would only just be making his way home from the local tavern. The man had taken to drinking heavily since the family had fallen apart.

It was a nightly occurrence. She had left an hour before dawn that morning, and her father still hadn't returned.

She only knew that she heard her father returning sometimes as she was waking, and sometimes a little later.

He had given himself over to the torment of memories that he couldn't let go of.

She had almost fallen into the same life. Her world had been fancy

parties and dancing with boys, but everything had changed.

Fortunes could be lost so quickly. It had happened in a flash. She had gone from riches to rags, from fancy parties to working in a factory.

She turned the corner. Smog filled the air. These factories made it hard to breathe anymore.

She hated being in this part of town, but it wasn't something she could avoid. She had to come here, coughing softly as she walked into the door of the building.

The front room was filled with several tables and lockers where workers could stow their belongings. She didn't carry much with her, so there was nothing she had to drop off.

A woman stood at the other end of the room, right next to the door. Annie shared a moment of exhausted silence with the woman who took down the time that she arrived.

Nothing had to be said. They both knew why they were there and nobody had much use for chatting at the start of a long sweaty workday.

She took her station without another word, loading things into the machine to be formed. Steam poured around her.

It was mindless work and the only way to get her mind off of the miserable conditions was to lose herself in her own thoughts.

The thoughts were comforting. All Annie could think about was the life she used to have.

She daydreamed about the times before, something her mother had warned her never to do. They had told her there wasn't anything that could be done to get that back, so there was no use in dwelling on it.

But she knew her mother still tortured herself about the past. Annie

had seen her mother barricade herself into a room and not come out for days.

Her mother was dying under the weight of their downfall, but it wasn't something a doctor could fix. Rather, the woman's mind had broken.

Annie had been trying to help, but she just couldn't. She didn't know what to do besides trying to keep her life from spiraling more out of control than it already was.

Her parents certainly weren't in control of their own actions, not anymore. They were falling apart, barely people.

She was the one that did all the work, just trying to make sure there was enough money in the house for the family to eat. It was exhausting.

But this was her life now. Annie simply had to accept the truth. It wasn't going to get better or change. She would never again have the life she'd had before.

Eleven Years Earlier

Micah tugged on the sleeve of his ratty shirt. His clothes were all too small; he had hit a growth spurt recently, and there hadn't been time to replace his old clothes.

There would probably never be a chance to do that now.

He sighed, sitting on the wooden porch in front of the saloon. He was going to have to go inside.

They weren't welcoming to children in the bar, but he didn't have any other options. It had been two days since he had even had a bite of food to eat.

Micah was starving and he knew he couldn't keep going on like this. He needed some sort of help.

The preacher wouldn't be in town for at least the next week, so the church wouldn't help him at the moment. And he probably wouldn't live if he had to wait that long.

The hunger pangs were already far too strong.

He shivered and rose to his feet. Waiting longer wouldn't do him any good.

He had to know if anyone in this town would actually help him. If they wouldn't, he needed to find something else to do, some other way to survive.

He paused again as he came up to the door. Then he took a deep, steadying breath and walked inside.

It felt like all eyes went to him instantly.

The bartender's face contorted with annoyance. "We don't serve kids here."

Micah looked down at his hands. "I'm not here to cause any trouble."

"You couldn't cause any trouble if you tried." The bartender snorted.

Another man got up from the bar, striding toward the door. Micah froze and ended up being bowled over by the strange man.

"Get out of the way." The voice was so gruff and mean.

Micah hit the ground, but he still couldn't make himself move. He just stared.

The entire crowd was watching him now. Some people were laughing.

Micah wished he could just sink into the floor and disappear. He hated this—it just felt so wrong, like he didn't deserve to exist.

A shiver traveled down his spine and he planned his escape as the laughter felt like it surrounded him. Micah scrambled up to his feet.

He had to get out of the way before he was trampled by people on their way in or out through the door.

It felt like it took forever for him to regain his feet and by the time he did, the bartender tried to shoo him off again.

Micah decided that lying might be his best option. “I’m looking for someone here.”

“Who?”

Desperately, he searched the people in the room, hoping for someone with some mercy in their eyes. The room was closing in on him.

He looked down at his feet and started to shuffle out of the saloon. His stomach growled, giving Micah another uncomfortable reminder of the future that awaited him.

A hand rested on his shoulder.

Micah flinched, pulling away from whoever was touching him. He knew it wouldn’t end well if someone decided they wanted to beat him for even walking into the business.

“Whoa, it’s all right.” The voice was gentle and comforting.

It put Micah at ease. This man didn’t seem to want to laugh or kick him out of the bar. “Sorry,” Micah mumbled, keeping his head down.

“Don’t apologize. Are you okay?” the man asked softly.

The bar seemed to go right back to whatever business was happening before Micah had walked into the place. The world went on around him while he could only stare at the floor.

He let himself be led outside the saloon and the man crouched in front of him, eye level with the nine-year-old Micah. “Are you hungry?”

Micah nodded. He felt like he couldn’t say anything to this adult who looked at him with such pity.

It felt shameful to have to rely on the help of some stranger that he had found in a bar, but he was there anyway.

“How about we get you some food, and then we can talk about what happened to you.” The older man didn’t wait for an answer.

Micah didn’t really pay attention to the moments that led up to the food appearing in front of him, but as soon as they were seated and there was a warm bowl of stew there from the small hotel kitchen next to the saloon, he dove into the meal.

He was voracious, unable to stop eating until his stomach cramped up and he started to feel sick.

The man that had bought the food had tried to warn Micah to slow down, but Micah hadn’t listened. His hunger had been a much louder demand for his attention.

The man reached out to put a hand on Micah’s shoulder. “Take a break. We can get you more once your stomach settles.”

Micah stayed mute, just nodding.

“What’s your name.”

“Micah?” Micah felt so unsure of himself. He didn’t know if this man would suddenly turn on him or ask him to do something that he didn’t want to do.

But the man had brought him food, so Micah was grateful for that.

He just didn’t know what to expect now. This man seemed nice, but Micah knew better than to trust him right away.

The man watched him for a moment. The pity on the older man’s face made Micah twitch in his seat and look down at his hands. “What happened?”

“I just needed to eat.”

“I could tell that.” The man nodded. “But what happened to your

family?”

“I don’t have a family anymore.” Micah didn’t want to talk about what had happened. He was alone and that was all that mattered.

“I don’t have anywhere to go.” He couldn’t go home, there was no home to go to.

The man looked so sad, and Micah hated being the one to bring that kind of sadness to another person.

He glanced up at the man, finally bringing his eyes to meet the other man’s gaze.

There was kindness behind the sadness there, but it was a look of pity.

Micah was used to people looking down at him. What he wasn’t used to was people that seemed to actually see him as a person.

It made him feel strangely vulnerable, like this man could see right through him.

“I don’t know what happened to you, but whatever it was, it was bad.” The man leaned back in his chair.

“You don’t need to talk about it, but I need to know what I can do to help you.”

“Nothing.” Micah shook his head. “I just needed some food.”

“What are you going to do from here?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t have a plan. He never had a plan.

“What happened to your family?”

Micah drew in a shaky breath. He wasn’t going to be able to avoid the question forever.

This man was helping, and Micah felt as if he owed something for the meal he had been granted. “They were killed,” he explained quietly. “Bandits attacked our wagons.”

“You got away?”

Micah nodded.

“Do you have any other family?”

Micah shook his head.

The man frowned. “I have a ranch.”

Micah tilted his head, unsure why the man would be telling him this.

“It’s a family place and we can help you, give you a place to stay, food to eat, some work. Maybe train you to be able to get a job later.”

Micah thought about it. It sounded like it was too good to be true. If he said no to this, an offer like this may never come around again.

He slowly nodded.

The man introduced himself as Jack. Then, the two made their way out of the hotel café and onto the street.

It didn’t take them long to get to the ranch, but Micah had trouble staying awake on the horse. He was so tired, feeling at long last like everything might actually turn out all right if he just managed to not destroy his chances there.

They got off the horse once they arrived at the ranch house and another boy came out to the porch to meet them. The young man wasn’t much older than Micah, maybe ten or eleven years old.

“Who is that?”

“That’s my son.” Jack nodded at Micah, clearly seeing the apprehension on his face. “Don’t worry about it. It’ll be just fine.”

The boy was frowning heavily. It made Micah want to shrink into himself. He didn’t know what to do, but Jack led him to the porch to introduce them. “Wyatt?”

That must have been the boy’s name. Micah made a mental note about it. He was exhausted and he hoped he would at least remember the name of the son of his host.

“I’m Micah.”

“I don’t care. Who is this?” Wyatt had turned to glare at his father.

“He needs some help and we’re going to help him.”

“Why are you taking him in?”

“He’s going to work with us.”

“That’s just a kid,” Wyatt argued. “What can he do to help?”

“The same things you do around here. He’s got no one. We can help, so that’s what we’re going to do.”

It was clear Wyatt wasn’t happy to have the competition that a younger child on the ranch would offer. Micah didn’t know how long this would last for him.

It probably wouldn’t be long before Jack decided having Micah around wasn’t worth angering his son, but Micah would probably manage to get a few good meals out of the deal. He planned to stick around for as long as he could.

Micah climbed out of bed before the sun rose. The roosters would start crowing soon enough, but he hadn't waited that long to get out of the bed in years.

He liked to get a good start on the day, make sure everything was ready to go.

The house was older now, some paint peeling. They would need to fix the roof soon. But it was still home.

Squinting at the horizon, Micah could barely see the light of the sun starting to hint at dawn over the mountains in the distance. The moments right before the sunrise were some of the most beautiful parts of the day.

Wyatt would sleep in, so Micah preferred to get up and start working long before the man he shared the ranch with. It was always awkward when Jack's son was around.

Micah didn't like interacting with him, but Wyatt couldn't force Micah to leave, no matter how the man had tried when Jack died. Wyatt made him nervous.

He always had the most intense stare and stayed quiet far too often.

After he got dressed, Micah made his way out to start feeding the animals. He had already gotten everything gathered and set up when the roosters started to signal the sun's rise over the horizon.

Micah felt accomplished when he had the animals fed by the time Wyatt walked out of the house in the morning.

They didn't speak right away; there wasn't anything to be said. Both of them knew exactly what was expected of them and they would get it done.

Wyatt had never warmed up to Micah, even if it had been Jack's dream to see the boys eventually get along. Wyatt hadn't wanted to share his father, and now that his father was gone, the man seemed to have gotten colder.

There were plenty of women interested in Wyatt, but the older brother had never cared to really date. Still, he was generally considered the more handsome of the two.

The ladies swooned when he came around. Micah always felt like there was some need to compete with him.

It wasn't that Micah was a bad-looking man, but he didn't have the blond good looks of his brother. Micah had black hair and blue eyes.

He didn't cut his hair as often as he should, causing it to grow a bit shaggy. Micah didn't mind being that way; he didn't care much for regular hair cuts.

There were more important things to do, like working on the ranch. He had been raised on this land. Jack had loved both of the boys in his care.

Neither of them had a mother in the picture. Times had gotten tough on occasion, and Micah had found himself wondering if there was something more he could have done to become a part of the family.

As he rode, he frowned, running his fingers through his black hair. He wondered if Wyatt would ever truly see him as a brother, or if some things would never change.

Micah had tried to get to know the man that should have been his adopted brother, but Wyatt had never been interested in becoming friendly.

They had settled into civility, barely getting along and sharing the things they were required to in order to survive. Everything else just made them avoid each other.

That was a better way. When Micah had first arrived, Wyatt had fought hard against his presence on the ranch.

When lunch came that afternoon, they sat down near each other, but not together. Micah cleared his throat.

Wyatt looked up at him. "What?"

"Nothing." Micah shook his head.

"All right." Wyatt went back to his meal.

The man that should have been an older brother to Micah was shoveling the food into his mouth, seeming not to care what it tasted like.

While Micah cared about the taste, the meal was simple at best. It didn't taste bad, but it was as good as two bachelors could hope for.

"Food's good today." He was trying to talk about something, feeling the need to fill the silence.

"It's good enough." Wyatt didn't seem interested in a conversation.

Micah fell silent again, pushed away from trying to connect to Wyatt once again.

Wyatt put his spoon down into the bowl. "We need to get back to work."

“We should finish eating first. I didn’t stop for breakfast.”

“That’s not my fault,” Wyatt grunted, getting up from his seat.

Once again, Micah was left alone. His shoulders slumped. He didn’t know what to do about Wyatt. There had to be some way that he could get along with the man.

“I’ll be right out,” he said before Wyatt left.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Micah felt guilty for not being there to help enough. He knew the guilt made no sense—he had gotten up earlier than Wyatt and done work before the sun had come up.

But there was that edge of unworthiness that always tinged everything he did. And Wyatt seemed to bring those emotions out with a lot more strength.

Micah made himself remember all the times Jack had told him that he didn’t have to work harder than everyone around to be worth something. He had shown Micah what it meant to be humble and kind.

Jack had been a loving and strong father figure. But Jack was dead now, and the fractures between Micah and Wyatt now no longer had a conduit that allowed them to communicate beyond the barest of necessary words.

They didn’t speak, hadn’t really spoken since Jack had passed from this world. Micah knew that there was no way to make it better.

Wyatt wanted Micah gone from this ranch.

Once Micah had finished all of his chores, he got to work on another project that he wanted to get finished up—something that might help Wyatt finally accept him.

He looked at the ground in front of him. The foundation had already been laid and he was working on the framing.

It was taking longer than normal because he didn't have much help to build the house, but he would get there. He was creating himself a home that he could move into and out of the house that he had shared with Wyatt.

Maybe the space apart would help them. He knew Wyatt was jealous. The other man believed Micah had taken away his father, stealing precious attention and time because Micah had needed so much work to get back to his feet.

It had taken so long for Micah to trust again. Jack had worked with him, but Wyatt had been jealous of that.

It had left a rift that simply couldn't be repaired. Micah had tried, but Wyatt had no interest in that.

But Micah had other ideas. As he spent the afternoon framing up his house he found that the process was going faster than he had anticipated.

While he worked, he started to put together the words of an advertisement, something to send to the newspapers back east. A way to get a family of his own.

The house was coming together. It would take a while yet to get it done, but letters and advertisements always took some time to travel.

That would give him time to finish this project.

He once again considered asking Wyatt to help, but he knew the man would never do that for him. Even if Wyatt wanted him out of the house that they shared.

Other young bachelors in the area had found some good luck with advertisements for brides from the east coast, women who needed a

better start in life or just wanted to see the American wilderness.

He could give that to a woman and maybe even have a chance at starting a family. Micah was only twenty years old, but he knew what he wanted out of this life.

He wrote his heart out onto that page, sharing it with random strangers that lived in a part of the country he had never seen before.

He tried not to get his hopes up, however. He knew all too well how much it hurt to have them dashed.

Annie woke with a jolt, the blanket clinging to her body. Her heart pounded. The shouting was intense.

But it wasn't the end of the world. The house wasn't on fire.

Her parents were just fighting again.

She covered her ears with her hands as soon as she regained her breath. Her heart stuck in her throat.

She hated hearing the people she cared about most being so miserable. Annie would give anything to help them feel better, but she knew there was nothing she could do.

Her mother screeched in rage, "You did this to us. We wouldn't be here if you hadn't gambled our money away."

"It wasn't gambling. It was an investment."

"An investment. That's what you call betting against our own country in the war?"

Annie could picture her mother throwing her hands up into the air as the matriarch screamed.

Her father was shouting back. He was enraged, but not at her mother. She assumed he was angry at himself for what had happened to his family.

Annie was angry at him for that too, but she hadn't let herself dwell on those emotions. She had more important things to do.

She had to get out of the house. There would be no more sleep now that her father had arrived home and her mother had reacted to his lateness.

The screaming continued, but it was the same fight that she had heard a thousand times. It never ended. There would be no resolution.

An uneasy peace would be found when they were both tired of shouting, but it wouldn't last for long. Once a week or so, they woke her up with these arguments.

She could do something, go out and try to stop it, but it would probably just make her late to work. It would be better just to slip out of the house through the back door while the war raged in the front room.

She dressed quietly, not turning on her lantern. It wasn't like her simple clothes were terribly complicated or fashionable; it was easy to slip into her dress and out of the house, disappearing once she reached the streets of the city.

It was still quiet. There were a few hours until she actually had to be at work.

A newspaper boy waved his wares around, and she counted out the coins to purchase his product and moved to a park. At least there she would be able to sit in the quiet without all the shouting surrounding her.

She thumbed through the paper, feeling her stomach growl. She had spent her money on the paper, so breakfast was out of the question.

She wouldn't be able to eat until lunch came along now.

Annie tried to put the discomfort out of her mind by focusing on the

paper. She enjoyed reading stories about different parts of the world, but her eyes were drawn to the personal advertisements instead.

It seemed like a thousand men were looking for a bride—so many opportunities to move out west and start a new life.

She had never thought she would dream about life on the frontier. The last few years had changed that, however.

Now, Annie was eager to see something new and explore some other way to live.

Life as a factory worker and caring for parents that were so lost in despair had drained her soul. She felt like another piece of it went missing every day.

Her heart broke as she read through all those words. Most of them seemed hollow, men looking for a woman to help take care of them and support their ranch.

Some seemed to be looking for something more distasteful from a mate.

But there was one advertisement that seemed to speak right to her heart. She felt it echo in her mind even when she looked away from the page.

The man that had written the words had spoken of a longing so deep that she couldn't ignore it.

She wondered if she could even write to him.

There was so much on her shoulders. Her parents didn't work, didn't have a way to support themselves if she wasn't bringing in money from her job.

They wouldn't survive without her.

The guilt hit her in the gut because she was actually considering answering this advertisement.

She looked away from the paper and down into the grass. Her eyes landed on a small purple flower that had struggled its way up through the concrete at the base of the bench she sat on.

It reminded her of the way people faced adversity. Some people could grow through it and become something great, while others couldn't.

There were a thousand seeds or more that would never grow because of the concrete, but there was always a chance that one would find a crack and grow into what it was meant to be.

She could be that seed, but she wouldn't grow here. Not in this city. Not near her parents. Annie had a chance at a future, but she had to grasp it.

She was going to write that letter, to speak to the man that had somehow spoken to her own pain through the advertisement, a man that searched for a family and connection to another human being.

She felt the loneliness that came with hunting for something that was no longer there. He had lost his family twice over. That was what he had said.

Annie had only lost her family once, and they were still physically there for her, even if they had shut down emotionally. They were long gone in their own grief.

They had lost a way of life that they had come to depend on.

She got up from the bench and walked to the post office. It felt like her body and soul had made the decision before her mind could tell them not to write this man.

Her head screamed that it would only lead to heartache, but her feet and her heart didn't listen.

Annie purchased the paper and envelope to write the letter, then borrowed a pen from the postmaster and sat down to write a response to this advertisement.

Her heart was beating like a drum.

She attempted to control the hope bubbling up inside her. Annie didn't know how she would take it if she didn't get a response to this letter.

While there was a good chance this would lead to nothing, she felt something calling her to Micah. Sure, they might never meet, but there was always a chance.

And she couldn't let that just slip away.

The streets of Boston bustled around her. Annie was tired, but she rushed to the post office anyway.

Her brown eyes darted from side to side as she dodged people on the sidewalk. The windows of the shops glowed with items she would never have a chance to buy again.

The dresses seemed to flutter around her, but she tried her best to ignore them as she headed to a small, unassuming shop front with the words “Post Office” painted on a sign over the door.

The postmaster of that small office smiled at her. “You keep checking every day. You know we deliver to your home, right?”

“I know, but it’s best it doesn’t come to the house right now.” She shook her head.

“Well, you’re in luck. A letter came in for you today.”

“Is it from Micah?”

The older gentleman laughed. “Of course it is. You wouldn’t be as excited for a letter from a creditor, would you.”

“I take it my father has some mail from them?”

“I’ll make sure they get delivered to him.” The postmaster offered another kind smile as he walked to the back to retrieve the letter for

Annie.

It was hard to wait. She wanted the paper in front of her.

She had devoured every word that he wrote to her, learning more about the man as the feelings started to weave themselves into a thick tapestry.

It was undeniable. She was in love with a man she had never met.

Annie had always imagined that she would see the face of a man before she fell so hard for him. She wondered what Micah actually looked like.

Her mind kept forming pictures of him. A beautiful man with the sun in his hair and a ruddy tan. She didn't know if he actually looked like that, but her mind was picturing him clearer with every passing moment.

Micah didn't brood in his letters, but she knew there was so much pain in his past. He had lost his family young, then been adopted by a man that had died recently.

He had told her these things, but he always somehow made it sound like a source of strength instead of pain and agony. Annie wanted that kind of hope in her life; she wanted to feel the things he showed her through his words.

He didn't use fancy language, but he spoke with pure honesty, and that meant something.

When the postmaster handed her the letter, she hugged it to her chest. It still felt completely unreal. Another letter.

Micah always wrote back right away, and it had become one of the few things in her life that she could count on. Micah would write and his letters would bring sunshine.

The postmaster smiled at her. "I'm sure it's good news."

"I hope it is." Annie tempered her expectations, but she didn't want to wait to open it. "I should go."

"Go on, then." The older man shooed her off.

She rushed out of the post office and headed home. She wanted to be someplace private to open the note. Her heart was thudding as she walked into the house.

Her parents were there, fighting once again. She was actually surprised her father was home at all. He was normally gone at this time.

Her father spotted her immediately. "Annie."

She winced, fearful of what this could mean. "What is it?"

"Do we have any money?" her father demanded.

She remembered how kind he used to be when she was younger. That had all changed when he had fallen into the drink with the loss of their fortune.

Now, he could be cruel and angry, depending on how much alcohol was in his system. He smelled like he had already been drinking.

Her mother got between them. "She's not giving you another penny to piss away."

"It's not your choice."

Annie tried to find the right thing to say, but no words escaped her lips.

Her father waved in her direction. "Just give me the money."

Her mother smacked her father's hand out of the way. "You leave her alone. You aren't getting any more money from her."

Annie felt so small whenever this happened. Her father could easily go through every dime she made if she let him, but telling him no was so difficult.

She was lucky, though. Her mother's strike seemed to distract her father from Annie, giving her a moment to plan her escape from the room.

The rage continued, and it broke Annie's heart. She hated this.

Annie wished she could fix all of the problems that her parents had, but she couldn't make enough money to put them in the kind of life that had fostered their happiness before.

She was just a woman trying to make do with what she could earn.

She clutched the letter close, not letting it show. She hadn't told her parents about the growing relationship with Micah yet and this was a terrible time to bring it up to them.

It was always a horrible time to try to bring it up. They didn't need to know.

She slipped out when the argument turned from her, heading to her room to try to drown out the shouting voices.

It was behind the safety of those walls that she finally lit a candle and opened the letter.

Her heart soared. This one was long.

Annie smoothed the paper onto the desk, then reached into the drawer and pulled out the stack of letters.

She liked to reread every single letter before she got to the new one. It

had become a habit of hers, something that helped her retell the story in her mind, only adding to the ending.

Micah's letters got more hopeful with time. He claimed he hadn't gotten many responses to his post, but she wasn't sure that she believed that.

The way he had written those words had to have called out to a thousand hearts. She couldn't be the only one.

But nothing else felt odd about the letters. Micah made her feel special. He asked her questions and she responded with questions of her own.

They had both answered them dutifully, learning about each other.

By the time the newest letter was on the top of the stack, she had forgotten about the storm of shouting from the front room. It was a good way to distract herself.

She paused, breathing in the moment as she gazed at the letter before she let herself read it.

She didn't know what was hidden in those pages, but the anticipation was exciting. She almost didn't want to look, because the possibilities meant so much.

Annie didn't wait too long to actually start reading, as much as she wanted to wait longer to savor all the possibilities of what might be in those words. She started to read.

Her heart skipped.

Micah had asked the most important question of her life in those pages. He wanted her hand in marriage.

This was everything she had hoped for and more. Micah actually wanted her. Someone wanted her for her heart and mind.

It would be such a nice life. She just had to do it.

As she was penning a reply, her mother came to the door. “Your father has left.”

“Thank you.” Annie nodded, not really paying attention to what her mother was doing.

The older woman walked over and looked over her shoulder. “You aren’t going to say yes, are you?”

“What?” Annie looked up, then realized Micah’s letter was plainly visible. She slammed her hand on the table to try to hide the words.

“Don’t marry him.”

“Why not? You don’t know anything about him.”

“You don’t, either. You don’t know this man. They all lie, and then as soon as it turns bad, they turn on you. You can’t trust him. Never get married.”

Annie frowned, sinking into her chair. She didn’t know what to say.

Her mother stomped out of the room.

Annie tried to remind herself that her mother was just upset because of the fight with her father, but there was something about the way her mother had bitterly announced the state of things that Annie couldn’t help but feel the doubts start to wiggle into her soul.

It was the worst reaction to Micah that she could imagine—just immediate hatred, then moving on like it was nothing. The coldness sent a shiver down Annie’s spine.

Micah couldn't stop fidgeting. He wasn't so good at waiting.

Jack had always tried to teach him patience, but it was one of those lessons that never seemed to stick.

He hoped he hadn't moved too soon. Annie was a good woman, he could tell from her letters. And she had been the only one to respond to his advertisement.

He paced a bit on the porch before walking into the house, running his hand through his shaggy black hair.

She always seemed to assume that she was competing for his heart, but he never felt like there could be anyone else. Her pain reminded him of his own.

She spoke about the losses she had suffered, and she seemed to understand the need to work hard to make a life for herself.

He'd asked her if she wanted to be rich again, but she said she just wanted enough to eat and not have to worry about being homeless.

He could understand that. The fear of not having the food on the table was something that had taken him a long time to get over.

Annie deserved better than that. She worked hard, barely complaining about how difficult her job was.

Micah knew she was sore most days, but that was to be expected. He

was sore every time he took a few days off. It took some time to get used to working again.

He couldn't imagine having to learn to work hard after an entire life of ease.

He walked into the house for lunch and found Beatrice there. She had been their housekeeper for years and had helped raise the boys while Jack worked on the ranch.

The middle-aged woman had slightly graying hair. It had been black when Micah had first met her, but that was more than a decade before.

She grinned at him.

He smiled back at her. "What are you so happy about?"

"You got a letter today."

Micah felt a mix of hope and fear fill his chest. It built an uncomfortable knot that traveled down to his stomach and formed a stone there, causing him to feel a little ill.

"A letter? Is it from Annie?"

She grinned wider and held out the paper. "I hope it's good news."

"She wrote back fast."

"That's a good sign." Beatrice nodded.

"Are you sure about that?" Micah didn't know how he felt about it. Sitting there with the letter in his hands filled him with fear. What if she said no to his proposal?

Beatrice must have seen his hesitation. She gently shook his shoulder in a comforting gesture. "It's going to be fine."

“What if she says no?”

Beatrice chuckled softly. “She’s not going to say no.”

He wondered where she got her confidence. She always seemed to know just what to say to make him feel better, and he couldn’t thank her enough for that.

“But you aren’t going to know if you don’t read it.” The housekeeper motioned toward the letter in his hands.

He nodded and sat down at the table, slowly opening the envelope. Beatrice busied herself cleaning up while he read the letter.

His heart skipped. He whooped as he got the most important part.

Beatrice let out of a hearty guffaw. “Looks like you got the answer you wanted.”

“She said yes, can you believe it? She said yes.” Micah grabbed Beatrice’s hands and started to dance around with her, celebrating the good news.

“That’s great, Micah. I knew it all along.”

“I don’t know how you can be so confident about everything.” He shook his head.

She walked around the table to pat him on the shoulder. She was as close to a mother as he had ever had. “Experience.”

“What kind of experience would tell you that?” He shook his head.

“Well, you may not know this, but I was once a young woman. Young women don’t like disappointing people. We’re raised to avoid causing problems.

“If she was going to say no, she would have taken longer to write the

answer,” she explained. Micah thought about her wisdom.

It made sense, but he still didn't have the kind of faith in people that she did. Beatrice had always seemed to know everything about the world.

Micah felt outmatched by this woman's strength. He knew he had been through a lot in his life, but there was something about the unflappable way she faced every challenge that made him think she was so much more capable than she ever let on.

He respected the housekeeper for that. She had come into their lives and helped with anything that they needed.

He had heard tell that she was a young widow who had never had children of her own, but nothing was ever confirmed. Beatrice didn't speak much about her past before she came to the ranch.

Micah knew what that meant. He had the same kind of past. He didn't like talking about the loss of his first family as a child.

The few memories he had were treasured, but never given words. They were simply pictures in his mind that haunted his dreams.

Wyatt never seemed to be interested in such things, but Micah knew he would have to tell his adopted brother about the upcoming wedding.

Wyatt would never approve. That wasn't exactly a secret. Wyatt would probably never marry—he couldn't trust a wife not to die like his mother had.

Everyone on this ranch was somehow broken. It was a piece of land that seemed to attract people who had felt pain, and it helped them live somewhat happy lives.

And Wyatt seemed happy enough, even if he never talked to Micah about it.

Wyatt's boots sounded on the porch and Micah drew in a breath.

He had barely mentioned the advertisement to Wyatt and he wasn't even sure if his brother had paid attention to Micah when he had been talking about it.

Wyatt paused at the door and looked at Beatrice and Micah. "What are you two staring at?"

"Micah got another letter from that girl."

Wyatt snorted.

Micah tried not to let his heart break at Wyatt's disinterest. It always made him feel a little more broken, though he knew Wyatt had some reasons for his distrust.

They never spoke of those things, but it was definitely something he could feel coming off of Wyatt in waves.

Micah's eyes fell back to the letter.

Beatrice frowned slightly. "She agreed to marry him."

Wyatt paused mid stride and stared at Micah. "You asked her to marry you? That was stupid."

Micah was in shock. He couldn't believe what Wyatt was telling him. He didn't know what to say and just ended up stammering.

Beatrice butted in. "That was rude."

"Don't care. He shouldn't be worried about getting married yet. We're trying to build up this ranch."

"We can do that after I get married," Micah protested.

"Does she know anything about ranching?"

Micah squared his shoulders. "She can learn about all of that."

"If she doesn't know it already, she's just going to get in the way."
Wyatt turned around and walked out of the house.

Micah ran his fingers through his hair and felt a tear run down his cheek.

Wyatt didn't know Annie like Micah did. The woman was strong and she would do great things for the ranch when she arrived.

Beatrice tutted around a bit. "Don't worry about him."

"I know," Micah mumbled.

The housekeeper waved a wooden spoon in his direction. "I mean it. Wyatt's happy for you. He's just not good at showing it."

"You keep saying that, but he never shows it."

"I keep saying it because it's the truth. He's your brother and he cares about you. It's going to be fine. Now, go back to being happy."

Micah gave a wry laugh. "It's not that easy."

Beatrice slowed down a bit. "I know, but at least try. This is a good day for you. You're going to do great things and it's going to turn out perfectly."

"I hope it does." Micah nodded and started to walk out the door. There was work that needed to be done and he couldn't delay it any longer.

Beatrice shoved biscuits and a slab of ham into his hands on his way out the door. "You forgot to eat."

"Thankfully, you always remember." His smile had sadness behind it. What Wyatt had said would stick with him for a very long time.

Micah wasn't sure he would ever be able to let it fully go. The doubt would stay there until he was certain Annie had arrived and fully settled into life at the ranch.

Wyatt's teeth ground together as he rode his horse, carefully herding cattle into the corral.

His mind was elsewhere, but he was so used to the job that he rarely made any mistakes. Wyatt had lived in this world his entire life.

Wyatt knew he would always be alone; there was no use in getting married. That always ended badly.

He had seen his father suffer through the loss of his mother. And instead of coming together like his family should have, his father had gone out and found another son.

He had hated Micah for it when they first came together, but Wyatt had grown past that. He didn't hate Micah anymore.

He just didn't know how to talk to the man and he didn't want to drive him away. Micah was the only family he had left.

He couldn't lose Micah, not even to this strange woman that was going to be traveling to the ranch to live with Micah.

Wyatt had never been able to deal with what had happened to his mother. He had never been able to miss her.

This new boy had needed love and care, and his father had just expected Wyatt to accept the presence of this new brother.

Wyatt hadn't wanted to do that, hadn't wanted to just accept this boy into his life. Maybe Micah had deserved more from a brother than he had been willing to give, but that didn't mean Wyatt didn't care about the kid.

That was what Micah was. He knew Micah still held his heart on his sleeve.

The boy believed everything would always work out for the best and there would be nothing to stop him if he really put his mind to a project. Wyatt knew better.

Sometimes people left, and sometimes things went wrong. Nothing could ever fix those wounds. Wyatt had been living with them his entire life.

Micah was a golden child, blessed to forever land on his feet. Wyatt had lived his life in someone else's shadow.

His father had always told him he was special, but Wyatt had always felt like there was something else more important than him.

Wyatt steered his horse around. The cattle were behaving, moving in the direction that he wanted them to move. It was a nice change.

Problems usually came up, but this time he was able to stew in his own thoughts.

Micah had been the source of that insecurity. Wyatt knew his father loved him. His father was a good man that had so much love in his heart.

Wyatt was bitter about Micah coming into his life, but the boy did need the help to survive. He knew why his father had taken the younger boy in.

But it didn't stop him from feeling like his family had been fractured by the new face in the home. The resentment had bubbled up, and

now they barely spoke.

Wyatt simply didn't know what to say to his brother.

And he had to figure out how to start communicating. He needed to find a way to convince Micah not to get married. It would only lead to heartache.

Lives could be lost so quickly in this part of the world. There was no hope if fate decided to rip Micah's young bride from their lives, just like Wyatt's mother had been taken from his father.

And there was no way to know when someone would simply fall into their lives like Micah had. Micah had taken his father away.

Wyatt had needed someone to take care of him, and instead they had gotten a project. As much as he hated to admit it, he had found himself attached to the project, feeling that Micah was a little brother who still needed protecting from himself.

He knew Micah had been writing letters to a woman back east. He was so excited about it and couldn't help but gush about her.

Wyatt worried it would only end up with more heartbreak on this ranch.

Both Wyatt and Micah had both lost their parents—Micah had lost one set of parents and then lost the father that he and Wyatt had shared. It wasn't going to end well.

He knew this would only end up with Micah hurt, and this woman would put the entire ranch at risk. He couldn't let that happen.

Annie toyed with the sleeve of her dress. Her nerves were getting the best of her.

This was the nicest dress she owned and she shouldn't mess with the pretty lace accents, but she couldn't help it.

Her fingers deftly tugged at the knotwork that fell over her wrists, not untying it, but adding extra stress to the garment.

It felt a little unreal knowing what she was walking into. The last few years had been crazy, but now it was all leading to something better.

It was a big risk to spend a month's wages on a new dress. It was an even bigger risk to take a train all the way across the country.

If something went wrong, she would have to go back home.

There was a letter in her small bag. Her mother had given it to her before she had left home.

Annie wished she had never read that letter. Her mother had just said the same things in the letter that she had already said.

There was an offer to come back home when this marriage failed. The problem was that Annie couldn't be sure if her mother actually wanted her around or if she just wanted the income Annie brought in.

It hurt to lose all trust in her parents, but there hadn't been much love

in the house lately. Instead, they were left to suffer with their own mistakes.

She didn't know if they would be able to make it without her income, but she knew she couldn't spend her life taking care of them. She had to spread her wings and fly.

This would give her more chances to do all the things she had been denied.

And more than that, Micah gave her a chance to be happy. She was going to have something that her family no longer cared to have.

She stared out the window.

The landscape had changed from coast to mountains to plains. It was beautiful to see how much the physical world had changed on her journey.

It made it all feel so much more real. Her world was growing beyond what she ever thought possible.

Annie shifted to her feet, pacing the train car before coming back to her seat. Waiting was difficult.

Somehow, though, she managed to wait it out, and the train finally pulled into the station that held her destiny.

When she walked out of the car, she saw him. Somehow, she just knew it was Micah. The man seemed absolutely perfect.

He had dark hair that clearly needed a trim, but that didn't matter to her at all. She didn't care if he never cut his hair again.

It was his eyes that captured all of her attention. They were bright blue, full of light and passion. And he was staring right at her, too.

She took a few steps forward and tried to pick her jaw up off the

ground. "Are you Micah?"

The man nodded. His eyes were wide as he looked at her. "Annie?"

She nodded in return. "Yes. Uh, a pleasure to meet you." She had planned just what to say, but none of that was coming to her now.

"Likewise."

She almost laughed. It was such a strange response. It seemed Micah didn't have the same training in social niceties that her wealthy background had given her.

None of that mattered. He was the kind of guy she had always dreamed about.

Maybe it was foolish, but she honestly felt like this was the perfect end to her trip.

Micah might not have matched the picture she had formed in her head, but that was only because Micah in the flesh was somehow better.

"It's not a long walk." Micah audibly gulped, and she had to remember how to breathe. "I'm sure you're tired."

Annie shook her head. "I got plenty of rest on the train." She was tired, but she didn't want him to see that.

"Oh, that's wonderful," Micah said, shifting her bag and rolling his shoulder.

She hadn't realized that he had picked up her bag and was carrying it down the road. She blushed a little. "Thank you for the help."

"I don't mind carrying things. I know you've been on the road a long time. I probably should have brought the wagon, but I didn't think of it."

“Oh, you don’t have to go out of the way for me.”

“It’s not going out of my way.” Micah shook his head. “I don’t mind coming to get you. I promised I would take care of you, after all.”

She smiled. It felt so nice to hear those words. They made her feel safe. “I can’t tell you what that means to me.”

“I know.” He nodded.

They fell silent again. Annie felt a tiny edge of doubt start to mess with her head. Her mind wandered to the letter that her mother had written to her.

She didn’t want to go back if the ground fell out from under her again. This was a risk, but she didn’t have much to lose other than her pride. And that made it worth taking.

“The weather’s nice here,” Micah told her.

“Does it rain a lot?”

“Not so often, but it’s nice when it does.”

She laughed. “That’s not something you hear very often in the city. Rainy days are exhausting and dirty.”

“It’s not like that here. Water saves me a lot of work on the ranch. It gives me time to spend with people I care about.”

She blushed again.

Micah shifted her bag again from one hand to the other. “I hope you like the ranch.”

“I’m sure it’ll be lovely.” She couldn’t find anything other than basic niceties to say. It was a little awkward.

She had imagined being a clever conversationalist when she finally met Micah, but her mind just didn't seem to be working.

"It's a nice house. I think you'll like it." Micah nodded.

The letters had always been full of heartfelt writing. Now, they were awkwardly sharing long silences between small talk.

She sighed. "I'm so sorry, I don't really know what to say."

Micah nodded. "It was so much easier in the letters. I don't know what to say to you when you're right here."

"I feel the same way. I thought it would all come together when we met."

"I don't mind." Micah shook his head. "We can take some time to get used to talking with each other."

Annie nodded. Micah's voice carried so much hope. It made her heart swell. This was going to go well.

The doubts started to fade. The fear might not be completely gone, but her fears were less realized than before.

She had faith in Micah. It had brought her all this way and she wasn't going to let it slip away from her.

"You seem happy?" Micah said, but it sounded like a question. "Can I assume it's because I wasn't as bad as you thought I'd be?"

She laughed lightly. "I'm happy because I'm here, and you're definitely better than I thought you'd be."

"I'm sure you were imagining the worst. It's a leap of faith to come all this way on the promises in a few letters."

Annie shook her head. "That's not it. I didn't mind that. I was just

worried you were lying.”

“Why would I lie?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I don’t know why people lie about anything anymore. It just seems so silly and makes everything more difficult.”

Micah rocked back on his heels, and Annie stopped right beside him.

He didn’t say anything.

She wondered what was on his mind. Annie wanted to ask, but she knew it was probably a bad idea.

While she felt like she had known him forever, the truth was that she had only just met him. She would have to uncover what made this man tick.

They had an awkward chat on the way to the ranch and she took the time to start feeling Micah out. He seemed as sweet as he had been in the letters.

He was the same man that she had been writing to for months now, and she couldn’t wait to get to know him in person.

Micah was in awe of Annie. Every word out of her mouth was confident and intelligent, and the soft blush on her cheeks nearly stopped his heart.

She was everything he had hoped she would be. Her blond hair was messy from the trip, but it still seemed to be a bundle of perfection, with soft wisps of heaven that slipped down from the tie.

Her eyes were large, doe-like and brown. Her cheeks were porcelain. It was hard to believe that this woman was real and strange to think about her actually being there.

He had been keeping his hopes tempered about her appearance. He didn't care what she looked like, but he still wasn't disappointed by her appearance.

She was absolutely beautiful, probably the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen in his life. He couldn't breathe when she was so close to him.

Something about the way she spoke and the fire in her eyes just seemed to pull all the air from his lungs.

And it wasn't just her looks. Annie was strong, a powerful, fiery woman with the will to fight for whatever she wanted.

He knew immediately that she would do something great with her life. He was glad he would be able to witness it.

This was the woman he was going to marry. It felt unreal.

The conversation seemed to come easily between them as they approached the ranch, and when they got there, Micah walked her up to the house. Beatrice was inside.

The housekeeper grinned. "You must be Annie."

Annie offered a soft smile. "Yes, you must be Beatrice."

Beatrice cocked an eyebrow at Micah.

He glanced around for Wyatt while he shrugged in response to Beatrice's unspoken question. "I told her about my life."

"Well, I'm glad I was important enough to be included in that."

Micah scoffed. Wyatt was nowhere in sight, which was probably a good thing. Wyatt wasn't good with new people.

"Why wouldn't I talk about you? You're a member of this family."

Beatrice beamed. She had always been a part of this family. Micah knew Beatrice knew that, but it was still nice to see her face when she heard it.

Annie was smiling brightly. "It's nice to see this."

"Is it how you pictured it?" Beatrice tilted her head.

"It's better than I ever pictured." Annie bounced on her toes in excitement.

Micah laughed. It was such a beautiful sight. She was so happy.

Her letters had always carried an edge of sadness to them, a woman who was beat up by the world. But here, she seemed to just glow.

Everything glittered around this woman. She was breathtaking.

Beatrice held a hand out. "We should go get you cleaned up. I was just heating up water for a bath."

Micah nodded.

Beatrice laughed, and it was a happy, joyous sound. The kind of laugh more polite people would ask forgiveness for. But with Beatrice, it was so natural. "For her, silly boy."

Micah flushed. "Sorry, I didn't realize."

"Why don't you just wait here, and I'll help Annie get ready."

"I would appreciate that." Annie nodded and walked off, following Beatrice.

Micah was left alone in the sitting room. The nerves hit him hard and he ended up pacing up and down the floor.

He knew he had to get dressed, but it probably wasn't going to take long.

Still, he decided to rush off and dress in a hurry to make sure he was ready in time.

As he walked back out to wait for Annie, he ran into Wyatt in the front room. Wyatt had a sour look on his face, and Micah looked down at his feet.

"It's not too late to change your mind." Wyatt's voice held such heavy judgment that it made Micah feel more uncomfortable.

"I'm not going to change my mind."

"You shouldn't marry her."

“What’s wrong with her? You haven’t even met her.”

“I don’t have to meet her to know it’s not going to end well.” Wyatt shook his head. “It’s just going to end badly.”

“You don’t know that. Plenty of people are happily married.”

Wyatt frowned. “Nothing’s going to be the same here with her here. She should just go back home.”

Micah sighed. He didn’t know what to do about Wyatt. No matter what he did, it was never good enough. Wyatt wouldn’t be happy with anything Micah did.

The man hated him. It always made Micah feel so small.

Wyatt slipped out of the room while Micah was trying to figure out what to say. He wasn’t alone for long before he heard someone coming down the stairs behind him.

He turned around and Beatrice stuck her head out the door at the top of the stairs.

“She’s almost ready. You should get outside. It’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

“Right. Good luck.”

She grinned. “Everything is going just fine.”

Micah rushed out of the house to find the preacher setting up on the porch. Micah greeted him, having missed his arrival while he picked up Annie from the train station.

He made a mental note to thank the man once all of this was over. He should have been more attentive to the preacher.

The pastor didn’t seem bothered by the lack of attention, though.

There would be a few hot meals and some money for his church in it for him, anyway.

Beatrice already had everything set aside for the man.

He took his position and turned toward the door as it opened.

Annie was there, all cleaned up. She looked positively radiant.

It stopped his heart in his chest. He didn't think she could be any more beautiful than she had been when he picked her up, but somehow, as a blushing bride with a clean face and hair, she looked magnificent.

He hadn't made a mistake. Everything about her was just as perfect as it had appeared in all of those letters. She had come all this way to be with him and he was going to be a married man. Her last name would soon be his.

His heart started to thud hard when he could function again. He found himself stuttering through the words of hope and love he was supposed to be saying.

Wyatt wasn't there, though. Micah didn't know what he was hoping for, Wyatt had shown no interest in anything having to do with the wedding.

But Micah still loved Wyatt, no matter how cold the man was to him.

Wyatt hadn't tried to force Micah off the ranch, but had just accepted his presence as a constant in his life. They worked the land together and tried to make the best of never really learning how to communicate.

Micah tried to put it out of his mind. He didn't want Wyatt to ruin this perfect day. He was in love with Annie. It hadn't been a traditional romance, but none of that mattered.

What mattered is that she was right there and he was going to be married to her in minutes.

Annie was beaming as she shared a kiss with Micah. She felt like she was on top of the world, and nothing could take this away from her.

Micah lifted her off her feet as they made their way into the house, carrying her over the threshold properly and setting her down inside so that she could appreciate the feast Beatrice had made for the occasion.

The woman must have been working for days to do all of the baking and cooking required for the extensive meal.

It was hearty food, made for men who worked on a ranch, and there was enough for everyone to be stuffed and then save the leftovers for a later meal.

Annie hadn't seen a meal with that much food since before her parents lost everything. Her stomach growled.

She had barely eaten on the train and this would be her first full meal in nearly a week. It felt so nice to see all the food.

Micah didn't stop her when she walked over to sit down with everyone at the table. He just came over and sat down next to her. "You're going to love this."

"It all looks amazing. I can't believe it." Annie's eyes were wide as they traveled over the fully laden table in front of her.

“Beatrice is an excellent cook, she always takes care of us.”

Beatrice beamed with pride.

Annie smiled at everyone as the neighbors gathered around them to celebrate their special day.

The meal was hot and fresh. She didn’t know how Beatrice had made the time to do this, but more food was coming out of the oven while plates were being served.

Neighbors stopped by and ate the meal with them. It felt like everything was going well, but Annie knew she wouldn’t remember all of those names.

Every so often she looked over at Micah. He was smiling at her. Sometimes, she caught him staring and she knew he had caught her staring a time or two as well.

Other people seemed to take note of it, too. Annie couldn’t count how many times people mentioned how much the pair seemed to be in love already.

Every time she heard it, her heart caught in her throat and she looked back into the bright blue eyes of her new husband.

She could get lost in those eyes. It wasn’t so much the color as the pure kindness in his gaze. She was used to people with cold, dead eyes, but Micah was very much alive.

In fact, it seemed everyone there had a sense of community. This hard world seemed to have brought people together to be something more than a small ranching community. It was like everyone had some familiar respect for each other.

Maybe that was wishful thinking, but it kept her from thinking about the man glowering at her from across the table.

Beatrice had explained that the man was Micah's brother, a man named Wyatt. She knew from the letters that Wyatt and Micah had a strained relationship, so she tried not to bother the man too much.

The last thing she wanted was to cause a fight between her husband and brother-in-law.

Beatrice started to clean up at the end of the meal and Annie got up to help.

"You don't need to help, it's your wedding day." Beatrice shooed her back to her seat.

"I don't mind helping." Annie shook her head. "It's going to be part of my responsibilities, anyway."

"I'm the housekeeper," Beatrice shushed her. "This is my job and I've been doing it for years. Just enjoy your day. You need at least some time to rest."

Wyatt scowled from his spot across the table.

The guests were starting to filter out, and Annie sat back down.

Micah wiped his mouth and nodded. "I need to go and water the pigs."

Annie frowned. "I thought we were going to enjoy the evening together, like Beatrice said."

Micah smiled at her. "Don't worry. It doesn't take long at all."

With that, Annie was alone with Wyatt, who was still scowling at her. It made her feel very uncomfortable.

She shifted in her seat, trying to find something to do with her hands.

Wyatt cleared his throat, and Annie looked back up at him.

“I’m glad to meet you. I know we haven’t had much chance to talk.” She blurted the words out. She was still nervous, but maybe Wyatt just needed someone to talk to him.

At least, she hoped it would work to fix things between her and this man who seemed to dislike her for even existing.

Wyatt grunted. He hadn’t been looking at her when she spoke, but he turned his head to fix her with a hard gaze before he responded to what she said.

“You’re not going to be getting off easy with just some housework.”

Annie blinked, taken aback. “I didn’t think that, I just offered to help. I know it’s a lot of work.”

“It’s not some city job and you can’t just run off to the saloon after you do a couple chores.”

She didn’t understand why he would say something like that. Did he think she had a love of drink?

She wondered what Micah had told him about her father heading to the bar every day. “I didn’t think that it was.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think or don’t think. I know you’re not going to make it here. You should just leave and save everyone some time.”

“I’m not going to leave. I’m married to your brother.”

Wyatt stood up. “You’re going to have to learn how to actually work on the ranch. I don’t think a city girl is going to do well with that.”

“I’m not afraid of hard work.” Annie was insulted and that just made her stand a little stronger. She didn’t wilt under the pressure.

Wyatt didn’t seem to care she was sitting a little straighter. “Look, you

think you understand it, but I promise that you don't.

"Micah won't be home until late because he's working, and he's going to have to leave early. This isn't some easy life like you're thinking about."

Annie wasn't going to be intimidated by this man's gruff tone. "I plan to learn everything I need to. Don't you worry about that."

"You've got a lot to learn." Wyatt stood up and walked out of the house. She was left alone to think about what her brother-in-law had said to her.

It wasn't fair, but Wyatt had never seemed to be a fair man. Still, she wished Micah had said more about this man's reaction to changes in his life.

She felt like her day was soured by the presence of that man, but she had tried to get along with him. Wyatt, however, had no interest in getting along with her.

He had immediately come after her. He considered her some weak little girl that would never amount to anything in this world.

Those words played on her own doubts and she thought about the letter her mother had given to her before she got on that train. Nobody seemed to think she could make it, no matter what side of the country she was on.

It only made her want to prove herself even more. She was just as strong as everyone else there, but words like the ones Wyatt had spewed at her still hurt.

She tried her best not to let the doubt get to her and focus on the strength that had pulled her out of difficult times before.

Micah frowned as they walked to the new house he had built.

The wedding had been at the main house, but that wasn't where they were going to be living.

The house Micah had built wasn't quite complete, but it was livable. He would have to take some more time to paint and build the cabinets into the house.

Annie seemed to be strained. He wondered if something had gone wrong and he had missed it.

She had been so happy during the party, so he wasn't sure what could have happened to her because he hadn't really been away from her for long.

Maybe she was worried about all of the details of married life. He was worried a little bit about that, too.

He hoped they would still be a good match once they had fully settled into life together.

But her lip was quivering, and he noticed her shoulders sagged as they walked. Her feet were dragging, but her back was straight.

It was a weird conglomeration of body language. It confused Micah, but he wasn't surprised by that. He wasn't an expert at reading people.

His skill set had always had more to do with manual labor and ranch

work than in dealing with people.

He glanced up at the sky for a moment and sent up a silent prayer that he would say the right thing before softly clearing his throat. "Is there something wrong?"

Annie seemed to jump at the noise. She straightened up afterward, not acknowledging the fear that crossed her face. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." They were cresting the hill and his new house was going to come into view soon. He was nervous about whether she would like it.

She fell silent, not answering his inquiry.

He didn't know what to say either, so they walked on in silence until they came up to the front yard. She wasn't even looking at the house.

It wasn't the response he was expecting. Micah realized this probably wasn't just her nerves. There was something seriously wrong and he had no idea how to solve it.

He stopped walking. Annie stopped as well, but once again she didn't say much.

He frowned. "What happened?"

She shook her head. There were tears in her eyes, but there was something else there. She seemed to be standing stronger than normal, her fists were clenched.

She was fighting off the urge to burst into tears. "Nothing, don't worry about it." She stopped, drew in a deep breath, and looked around. "It's very pretty here."

She was deflecting the conversation. He decided to give her a chance to figure things out on her own and let the distraction occur.

“I know, I’ve always loved this place.”

“Is it yours and Wyatt’s?”

He felt like there was something behind the question. “Wyatt owns the ranch.”

Annie seemed to deflate a little.

Micah frowned again. “I’m sorry, but I know Wyatt is going to let me stay. Jack wanted Wyatt to make sure that I always had a place.

“We don’t always get along or anything, but we’re still family.”

Annie bit her lip and nodded. “That’s fine.”

He could tell she didn’t like his response, but he didn’t know why she seemed to feel so strongly about it. Something must have gotten to her, causing the complete flip from less than half an hour before when they were cleaning up after the wedding.

Micah found it very concerning. He didn’t know what she was feeling, but she seemed to be holding herself together by a thread.

He sighed. “You know you can talk to me about it, right? I’m not going to hold it against you if you need some time to get used to things.

“And if you want to leave, you can. I’ll help you get a train ticket in the morning. I even have an extra bedroom you can sleep in. I just want you to be happy.”

She burst into tears.

Micah stepped back. It was so sudden and he didn’t know what to do.

He didn’t have much experience with people randomly crying in front of him and it seemed like such a strange thing to do on her wedding

day.

Her voice came in fits and starts. Between hiccups and sobs, she explained what Wyatt had told her.

When he heard that, his heart dropped. He knew Wyatt didn't like him, but Micah had never known him to be cruel.

"I'm so sorry."

She slowly picked herself up off the ground, getting her tears back under control. "I shouldn't be so upset about it."

"I would be upset if it happened to me."

"I just didn't know what to do when you said he owned the place. I think he's going to use any excuse to make me leave his land."

"That isn't going to happen. Don't worry about that. Wyatt won't make you leave. If he did that, he would have to make me leave, too."

Annie shook her head. "I wouldn't make you leave with me. I just don't think he wants me here."

"Wyatt is a... special case, but I wouldn't worry about that. It'll be just fine. He just doesn't like change."

"You were so kind about him in the letters. Why didn't you tell me he could be that awful?"

"Usually he just ignores me. We don't talk a lot. I know he didn't want me to marry you, but I wasn't worried about it. It'll be fine."

She seemed to accept it, but Micah wasn't sure if she really believed him.

He couldn't blame her. It had to be upsetting for her to hear the kind of awful things that Wyatt had said to her.

He made a mental note to deal with Wyatt. The man didn't need to say any of those things.

He could have given Annie a chance to fit into the life here before he just assumed that she would never be able to make it. She had worked hard in the city.

Factories were known to be dirty operations with no room to breathe. It would always be more cramped than life on the range.

It couldn't have been that different.

He showed her into the house, letting her have a seat while he made some tea. He spent the night trying to comfort her and Annie quickly seemed to bounce back from the verbal assault.

As she finished her tea, he sat next to her, and she seemed to fall against his shoulder. Micah wrapped his arms around her.

She started to cry a little bit, sniffing into his shoulder. She was still upset, so he just let her cry it out.

He really wasn't sure what else he could do to make her feel better, but he had to try. This seemed like the best course of action.

Outside of the tears, it felt nice to hold his wife. He had dreamed about just being able to embrace Annie.

She had become his world in letters and now she was his world in real life.

Wyatt paced across the floor. He had seen the young couple walk over the hill to Micah's new house.

He kind of missed his brother, but Micah had built that house himself over the past few months. Micah deserved to have a home of his own on the land.

What he was worried about was the woman Micah had married. He deserved so much better than her. Annie was a city girl, and city girls were nothing but trouble.

They only cared about parties and playing games.

Micah was going to get hurt, but Wyatt could at least try to avoid the brunt of it.

Micah had never understood his realism. The younger brother that he had never wanted had always been an optimist.

Micah had seen the silver lining of life and worked so hard to see it all come to fruition—which meant that Micah was occasionally played for the fool. Wyatt had always tried to stop that from happening, but sometimes it just wasn't possible.

Micah didn't know how to stop his own heart from being broken.

That was why Wyatt had to scare Annie away. She was just going to end up like Wyatt's mother, anyway.

Micah hadn't been there when his mother had left. She was a city girl, living a life of parties at the saloon when she should have been home with her family.

When she left, it had broken his father. Wyatt didn't know what to do. They were shattered into a thousand pieces.

That was when Jack appeared with Micah, a boy without a home.

Last Wyatt had heard, his own mother was dead, and that was why she had never come home. Wyatt and Jack hadn't bothered to check, assuming those stories were right.

It didn't matter anyway because his mother had never returned to his life. She didn't want him. And the exact same thing would happen with Annie.

He knew the newcomer couldn't be trusted. She wouldn't do any good for anyone at the ranch.

Beatrice and Micah may have seen the world through rose-colored glasses, but Wyatt was fully aware of how dark reality was.

It hurt to face the truth, but he had faced it far too many times to not be keenly aware of the miserable nature of hunting for a bride through a newspaper advertisement.

Micah thought Wyatt hated him, and Wyatt didn't care that his brother thought that about him. The truth was, Wyatt cared about Micah more than he would ever be able to express.

He considered the man his brother, no matter how much he had tried to scare Micah away at the start of their relationship.

It had been a rocky start. His father had worked hard to make sure Micah was comfortable, but Wyatt had worked against that plan.

That meant Wyatt hadn't treated young Micah with any kindness.

Wyatt regretted that now, and it made him more eager to defend the other man.

Annie blinked as Micah softly shook her shoulder. “Mmph?”

she grumbled, trying to roll over. It had been a long trip and it felt like her sleeping was slightly off-kilter.

She had read somewhere that the rotation of the earth made it so that if you traveled your body might feel like it was earlier or later than it actually was.

This morning felt so much earlier than it actually was. She didn’t want to get up. She swatted at his hand, trying to push it away.

Micah seemed to insist she start moving, continuing to softly shake her shoulder. “Annie, it’s time to get up.”

She grunted again and got to her feet, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

“I can make some coffee if you want?” Micah offered.

She nodded and moved to her bag. She hadn’t bothered to unpack when she had arrived.

She had fallen asleep in Micah’s arms after crying for longer than she had thought possible. Micah hadn’t judged her, and had tried to calm her by explaining how to live on a ranch.

Summertime was hot and most of the work was done under the hot sun. Her skin quickly started to take on a deep tan, and her light hair

had lightened further in the sun.

Micah stepped out of the room while Annie dressed. By the time she was ready for the day, she could smell the coffee starting to brew.

The smell woke her up before the first sip crossed her lips. It felt like heaven.

She had loved the coffee back home, but there was something about coffee in a house that wasn't full of tense cold shoulders punctuated by massive arguments that made it taste all the better.

Micah smiled at her as she started to putter around the kitchen, buttering biscuits and setting them to warm next to the wood stove. There would be time to do more baking later, but Beatrice had sent them over some food to get them started.

As she served out the simple meal, Micah grinned widely. He looked so happy to have her there. "I'll get some more work on the house done this afternoon."

Annie nodded. "Is there anything I need to do today?"

"Just a couple of things. You should start slow. I know it doesn't sound complicated, but sometimes it can be a little tough to get all of it done."

"What's the list?"

"Just to get the eggs from the chicken coop and then pick the vegetables in the garden."

"I've done some gardening before," Annie told him.

"Then you should be in good shape. Have you ever handled chickens before?"

She shook her head.

Micah frowned. "I'll ask Beatrice to go with you the first time, then. They can be a little hard to handle."

"They're just chickens, though?" Annie was confused.

It didn't seem like it was going to be difficult work—just some chickens and vegetables. It couldn't be that hard.

But the way Micah was talking about it made her a little nervous. "Are you worried I might hurt the chickens?"

Micah laughed. "I'm more worried about them hurting you. You haven't spent much time near chickens, clearly." He seemed amused.

"Do you know something that I don't know about this?" Annie put her hands on her hips.

"They, uh, well, they attack people," Micah explained. "They can peck you pretty hard."

"I'm sure I can handle it."

"It can get a little chaotic when the chickens are all worked up."

"Do they get possessive of the eggs?" Annie tilted her head. She had never heard of this side of chickens.

It seemed a little odd to hear these kinds of stories about birds she had always believed were sort of passive creatures that simply laid eggs and pecked at the ground.

Maybe this was a joke they played on new people on the ranch. She didn't think Micah would do that, but she had seen evidence of his sense of humor and knew he did appreciate the occasional prank.

She nodded slowly, biting her lip.

Micah's smile started to lessen. "I'm serious, Annie, be careful with the

chickens.”

“All right, what’s the problem with the vegetables?”

Micah sighed.

“It’s just a long, hot job. The garden is bigger than one you would find in the city. You have to walk through the whole thing and look for any vegetables that might be ripe.”

Annie nodded. “I think I can handle all of that. It won’t be a problem.”

Micah beamed. “I know you’ll be fine, but it might take you some time to get used to all of it, so just go slow. Beatrice will teach you how to do the work.”

Annie nodded. “I take it these are jobs Beatrice would normally do on her own?”

“Usually whoever gets to them does the jobs. There isn’t always someone assigned to the chores or anything,” Micah explained.

“You’ll have your usual stuff, then we’ve got things people get to when they get a chance to do it.”

Annie nodded and bit her lip. “I’ll take care of it. You can count on me.”

“The work here never ends. It’s going to be every day.”

“I’m used to working every day,” Annie promised. “The factory work was hard and exhausting. I’m not afraid of working.”

“You know you don’t have to prove yourself to me, right? It’s not about that. I just want you to fit in here. If you can’t or don’t want to do that sort of stuff, we can find some other chores for you.”

“I know, I guess I’m just a little nervous about it.” Annie sighed

heavily.

“Because of what Wyatt said?”

She nodded, looking down at her feet.

“Don’t worry about Wyatt. It’s going to be fine. Wyatt is a good man, he’s just...” Micah trailed off.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a pause. “I want to help you, but we still have work to do. I promise I’ll figure something out.”

“I know you will,” Annie replied. “I trust you.”

Micah’s back straightened. He looked proud. “I’m glad you trust me.”

“I just hope he doesn’t decide to make me leave his property.”

“If he does that, he’ll lose me as well,” Micah announced. “I think Wyatt knows that. It’s why he didn’t say it in front of me.”

Annie nodded. She wasn’t sure how much she trusted it, but there wasn’t a lot of time to argue. She had things to do and she didn’t want to disappoint people.

It was just two chores, something that needed done, but Micah’s concern had worried her a little bit. Maybe she was in over her head.

She left at the same time Micah did, heading to the chicken coop. Beatrice was waiting outside for her, smiling widely.

“How’s the new bride?”

“Still getting my ranch legs.”

“Ranch legs?”

“Oh, sorry, it was a joke—kind of like sea legs, but for a ranch.”

Beatrice snorted with laughter. "I'm glad to see you still have your sense of humor."

"I try to keep my humor about me." She shrugged. "But Micah warns me the chickens can be feisty."

"You just have to show them they don't scare you." Beatrice waved it off. "From the look of you, you'll be just fine."

Annie snickered, glad someone had that kind of confidence in her.

They headed into the small yard in front of the coop and the chickens immediately seemed to be taking offense at the human presence that had invaded their home.

Annie took a step back from the threatening birds that were flying at her, but Beatrice just powered through. That must have been the right thing to do.

She followed Beatrice, shielding her face from the attacking chickens. Feathers were flying everywhere.

Annie nearly screeched as one of the hens flew straight up at her, taking a chunk out of her arm.

Beatrice laughed. "Need some help there?"

"I'm fine." Annie wasn't going to give up that easily. She was determined to make it work on this ranch.

This was her chance for a better life and she wasn't going to just let it go because a chicken attacked her. There would be no crumbling under that small pressure.

Beatrice seemed to be fearless, so Annie just copied the way the housekeeper functioned. It actually worked and they managed to get eggs from several dozen chickens within an hour.

Once outside, Annie drew in a deep breath. “That was exciting.”

Beatrice smiled. “Excitement is the name of the game. I’m afraid the garden won’t be nearly so exciting.”

They both turned when they heard a set of boots stomping their direction. Wyatt walked around the corner.

Annie frowned. She didn’t want to see him.

Fortunately, he ignored her and directed his attention to Beatrice. “I need you to help feed the cows.”

“We were just about to head to the garden,” she protested.

Wyatt sighed, vaguely waving in Annie’s direction without looking at her. “Just tell her what to do and get over to the barn.” He turned and stomped off.

Beatrice frowned, but didn’t argue with it. She turned to Annie. “It’s not hard, except spotting the vegetables inside the plants.”

“Are they hard to see?”

“Sometimes it takes a practiced eye to see the root vegetables and other things,” Beatrice explained. “Just be careful not to pull out extra plants or damage them.

“You’ll be fine. There are baskets and shears in the shed by the garden.”

Annie nodded. She was a little worried. If she let too many vegetables go to rot, it would only give Wyatt another reason to get upset with her.

The sun was hot and Annie was sore as she worked the potatoes out of the ground.

She hummed to herself and tried to forget the heat as it beat down on her forehead. Sweat poured down her body.

She was used to being hot and uncomfortable. She felt that every day in the factory, but somehow this felt a little different.

She still felt so strange about this place. On one hand, it felt like it had before. The work was hard and the days were long and hot, but she felt freer here.

Maybe this was about just being outside. She didn't know for sure.

This place was new, but there were still pieces of the life she was used to that she could find here. Hard work wasn't strange or awkward for her.

Still, she felt somewhat uncomfortable at the ranch. She had been informed that Wyatt made things feel a little strange, but she hadn't realized how aggressive Wyatt could be.

Annie only hoped he didn't continue his threats further than he had already done.

She pondered on the situation while she worked, but couldn't come up with any solution to the problem. Nothing seemed right—it was all

strained and awkward, and probably would be for a long time.

Annie glanced into her basket. She was proud of the job she had done, picking every vegetable that looked ripe enough to pick.

The creamer potatoes looked especially tasty, and she hoped Beatrice would cook some soon. They would be lovely mashed or fried up in bacon grease.

The excitement at the thought of those potatoes only grew as she practically skipped back to the house.

This was a job well done, something many people would have never thought she was capable of, like her mother or Wyatt or any of her friends from the life she had before her family's reversal in fortune.

Pride filled her chest as she walked through the front doors of the main house to deliver her vast bounty to Beatrice. Her spine was straight, even though the basket was heavy.

It must have been twenty pounds. Her hands and back ached, sore from all the work she had been doing.

Her heart started to pound when she saw Wyatt there discussing something quietly with Beatrice. His mere presence could destroy Annie's pleasant mood, but she quickly decided not to let it show.

He may try to get to her, but she wouldn't let him do it. She deserved better.

She squared her posture, standing straight and tall while she placed the basket onto the table.

"I finished. What else do you need me to do? There's still a few good hours of the day left."

Wyatt turned to her slowly and Annie's heart almost seized.

It was ridiculous to be so frightened of a man who had only spoken to her once, but she knew he could easily have her removed from his property. In a way, her future was in his hands.

Wyatt didn't say anything as Beatrice swept around him and tried to pick up the basket. Annie glanced at Beatrice and Wyatt seemed to follow her gaze.

His eyes narrowed, and he reached out and gently stopped Beatrice from getting past him. He frowned.

Annie didn't want to be so nervous by his response to her success, but she was. She was afraid there was something wrong with what she had done.

She had only done what was asked of her.

"Did you pick these potatoes?"

Annie felt a rush of offense bubble up inside of her. She had to bite back a scream and steady her voice before she said something foolish. "I did."

"Why did you pick them before they were grown?"

"What do you mean?" Annie tried to keep her voice steady.

Beatrice stepped in between them. "It was her first day, it's fine."

"Does she have any idea how much this is going to cost us? Those potatoes may ripen over time, but they'll never get any bigger. And we sell them by weight."

Annie suddenly felt as small as the vegetables that she had picked. Those weren't creamer potatoes. They were perfectly ordinary potatoes; she had picked them too early.

She tried to remind herself that it was a perfectly understandable

mistake anyone could make on their first day doing this sort of work, but she couldn't help but feel the urge to run away.

The feeling was solely due to the foul look on Wyatt's face. The man clearly hated the very fact that she existed and it made her feel so small and broken, like she had no claim on ever achieving happiness and nothing she ever did would be good enough.

Wyatt's gaze made her want to wither into the floor. This man could make her feel about a foot tall. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

Beatrice glared at Wyatt, though. It was a source of strength Annie felt like she could draw from.

The housekeeper frowned. "She's brand new. She was supposed to have help, but you called me away to help you."

Wyatt's head snapped toward Beatrice. "This has nothing to do with it."

Annie put her hands on her hips. She wanted to say something to him. She wanted to be bold and brave and stand up to injustice, but she couldn't make herself do it.

Her lower lip quivered with the fear of what could come of it if she ended up crossing this man and he left her out on the street. She didn't want to go home in shame.

Annie wanted her marriage to work, and that meant she had to accept the verbal thrashing Wyatt was throwing her way.

Her breath was shaking in her chest. She had to get out of there.

Annie ran away. She couldn't help it. She couldn't let Wyatt see the tears starting to stream down her face. This man was so hurtful that it felt like it would break her very soul.

She didn't know where to go; there was far too much space out there. It was hard for her to feel secure in what was supposed to be her home now.

Exhausted, Micah walked into the main house. The day had proven long and trying.

Wyatt was sitting in the living room. Micah frowned, but he didn't say anything.

Wyatt hadn't been speaking much lately and Micah was just fine with that. He didn't really want to see Wyatt.

He was on a mission to find his wife because she hadn't been at their house when he had gone there. But Annie wasn't visible in the main house, either.

Wyatt looked up at him. "She left."

"What did you do?" Micah's mind automatically snapped to the worst possible reason for Wyatt to look so smug.

"I didn't do anything." He stood up. "I just told her she made a mistake and she ran off."

"What mistake did she make?"

"She picked the potatoes too early. Look at how small they are." Wyatt indicated a basket on the table.

Micah stomped over to the table and looked at the vegetables. The potatoes were definitely picked a day or two early.

It would cost them a little money, but he felt like there was something beyond what Wyatt was saying. There had to be something else.

Annie had lost a lot of things in her life; she wasn't so easy to break.

Micah whipped around to stare at Wyatt, and Wyatt didn't seem concerned by the look on Micah's face. Micah didn't let that stop him. He had things to say to his brother.

"What did you say to her?"

"I pointed out her mistake and she ran off crying."

"I know you did more than that." Micah's fists clenched by his side. He had to fight back the urge to punch his brother.

Wyatt had never wanted Micah to be happy and this was just another step in whatever misery Wyatt was hoping to heap onto Micah's shoulders.

"I know you did. What did you do to her?"

"I corrected her failings. I told you it was a bad idea to bring her here," Wyatt snapped back.

Micah snorted in rage. "You don't get to make that decision for me. And you don't get to treat my wife like she's a child."

"You don't even know what happened."

"But I do know you. I know how awful you can be to others."

Wyatt frowned. "I'm not being awful. I'm protecting this ranch."

"From what? There's no one trying to hurt this ranch. We're all just trying to help it succeed." Micah threw his hands up.

He had to do something with them because the urge to hit his brother

was getting too strong. He didn't step toward Wyatt, knowing a fight wouldn't end well for anyone.

"You don't know that."

"You don't know that everyone is trying to hurt you. You just think that."

"It's my job to keep this place running." Wyatt was tense; Micah could read that all over his face. The man was worried.

Micah knew his adopted brother had nothing to worry about, but he didn't know how to make Wyatt understand that. "She's not a threat. She's not going to hurt you."

"She's going to hurt this ranch. She's some East Coast girl who has no business being here."

Micah clenched his fists down by his side. He had the urge to fight. "Where is she?"

"I don't know. I didn't watch her run off like a child." Wyatt shrugged.

The coldness struck Micah like a brick to the face. He didn't know what to do about Wyatt. He didn't know the source of Wyatt's rage and he never had been able to fix it.

Maybe there was no fixing Wyatt. He didn't know.

He had tried when he was younger. He loved the man, knowing Wyatt had been upset about Micah even being brought into Jack's life.

Wyatt had been the son before Micah arrived, and Micah had come into their lives at a bad time. They were brothers, but that wasn't good enough.

He wanted to be somewhere else, somewhere he didn't have to live with whatever fear that Wyatt held deep inside.

He had never seen Wyatt show any interest in anyone outside of the ranch. The older son simply didn't want to deal with them.

Then, there were the constant reminders that Micah wasn't a real son. Without the kindness of the older brother in his life, he would never have any sort of freedom or hope to count on.

Wyatt was simply the type of man that didn't care for outsiders, and that had now come to hurt someone Micah loved.

Annie was special. There was just something about her that connected with his soul.

Beatrice had said that Annie was lost just like Micah was. Micah wasn't sure if that was true, but it certainly felt right.

Being lost in the world was hard and it was better to be lost with someone who understood than it was to be on the wrong side of found.

He had wanted to feel that kinship with Annie, and he had no doubts in where her heart was, but he didn't know how to convince Wyatt of this.

The woman didn't deserve the kind of distrust his adopted brother heaped on her.

He honestly didn't know what to say.

A thousand possibilities rushed through his mind, but most of them were insulting or would only end up with the fight becoming more serious.

Micah had thought Wyatt had outgrown obviously cruel behavior, so it was hard for Micah to know what to do about his brother.

He stormed out of the house, hoping he would be able to find the woman he had convinced to come all the way to marry him.

Wyatt grunted as Micah walked down the steps, but Micah didn't turn around. Seeing Wyatt's face would just make Micah feel a lot worse.

But Wyatt didn't stop talking. "Just let her go."

"I'm not going to let her go." Micah stopped before he stepped off the last step to the porch.

"She's just going to leave anyway. Women like that always leave."

"You don't know that."

Micah started walking again. This conversation wasn't going to go anywhere.

He started to hunt around, trying to see where Annie might have gone, but she was already far out of sight by that point.

He sighed heavily and went to the barn to find Beatrice.

She turned to him with a look of concern on her face. "Did Wyatt tell you?"

"Where did she go? Did he make her leave?"

"No, he was just being awful to her about a mistake."

"Do you know where she went?"

Beatrice nodded and pointed Micah toward the back of the property.

Micah was grateful she hadn't left the ranch and headed back to the town. That meant he could still save this, convince her to stay.

He would have to do something about Wyatt eventually, but that could wait. For right now, he just had to find his wife and make sure she hadn't gotten hurt and the damage that had been done could be repaired.

Micah promised himself he would find a way to make all of this better, somehow. But he had no idea how.

Annie hated herself for crying so much over some words, hated the emotional state she found herself in.

She wanted to show a better face to the world and to the people at the ranch in particular.

Crying didn't solve problems. It didn't make the world a better place. It wouldn't fix the bad parts in her life and it wouldn't endear her to Wyatt.

Annie tried to tell herself Wyatt didn't matter, but he did. Her husband's adopted brother owned the land they lived on and he could take away her right to live there if he wanted to.

There would be nothing to do if he wanted to make her leave.

Micah loved her, but it didn't make a difference. It wouldn't change anything if she couldn't keep it together.

She heard someone walk up. She didn't know who it was and she didn't even bother to look up. It didn't matter if Wyatt or Beatrice had come to find her.

She would just take whatever they dished out at her and try to push forward, but for that moment she just wanted to feel terrible.

A soft arm draped over her shoulders, followed by the sound of a gentle voice that made it clear Micah had found her. "Annie?"

That one word melted her heart.

She tried to wipe away her tears as she looked up. Micah's eyes looked saddened by her plight. A thought wiggled into her mind.

Maybe she was fooling herself. Maybe he was in on it. She knew it wasn't true, but she couldn't help but feel some doubt echo through her.

Annie didn't know what to say to Micah. Not after what Wyatt had said to her.

She stayed quiet.

Micah's voice was tempered with sadness but still felt strong. She appreciated it. When he spoke it reminded her of something beyond the pain.

"I'm right here." He said it softly. Those three little words held magic.

"I know. I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I'll do better." She sniffled.

"You didn't do anything wrong."

"The potatoes were too small." Annie wanted to start wailing in agony again, but she stopped herself from attracting attention from the big house.

She didn't want Wyatt to find her and come down there to yell at her some more.

"That's all right. You don't have to worry about anything." Micah held her close. "I know Wyatt can be a handful."

"Handful. Is that all you can say about him?" A flare of anger formed in her chest.

"I don't know what to say. I should have seen what he was going to do

to you. I should have expected it.”

She sighed and rubbed her face, trying to pull herself back together. “I tried.”

“I know you did. You didn’t know what to do. You didn’t have the help you needed.”

Micah was saying all of the right things, but she wasn’t sure if she could believe what he was saying. He didn’t have the power to actually fix anything.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to do this,” she confessed.

“You can, you just need a chance to learn.”

“I’m not going to get a chance to learn.” She shook her head. “Wyatt doesn’t want me to.”

Micah frowned, inhaling loudly through his nostrils. “Wyatt didn’t approve of me getting married at all.”

“Why not?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Annie tried to wipe away her tears once again, but they just kept coming out of her eyes.

Micah’s arm tightened protectively over her shoulders. “I’ll fix it. You don’t need to worry about anything.”

Annie started to sob again, and Micah gave her the time she needed to get the hurt out in a series of heaving echoes ending in a horrible case of hiccups.

He let her cry on his shoulder. She wanted to be stronger, but right then, all she could feel was her own weakness.

The moment ended, five minutes of just letting herself feel the pain before it was time to pick herself back up and keep moving toward a better future.

“It will get better,” he promised, then repeated it. “It will get better.”

Eventually she believed the words he spoke. This man loved and cared for her. She knew he would never let hurt or pain come to her.

He deserved so much love and attention. She knew he would give her the life she wanted to live—maybe not the way she had always pictured it, but Micah cared for her.

He would make sure she had a place here.

Annie knew she still had a lot to learn. Life out west would never be easy or kind, but it could be a good life, if they were willing to make it so.

Micah made everything easier to handle. He made her life better. She appreciated his faith in her.

She wondered how long Wyatt would allow this ranch to be their home. “Maybe we should go somewhere else.”

“I don’t want it to come to that.”

“We may not have a choice.”

Her husband had stars in his eyes, so much faith in the world to turn out the right way and that people would always be there for him. She’d never had that kind of faith.

Annie envied the way her husband could always find the positive in an impossible situation.

Her mother had called optimists fools. Her family hadn’t believed in faith—they believed in good breeding and wealth. They believed in

money.

But Annie knew there was more to life. She just couldn't feel it herself yet. Nothing felt right when she tried to hope for anything.

Micah had no such problems. He existed as a shining light in an otherwise dark and impossible world.

She looked at him. "Why does Wyatt hate me?"

"I don't know. He hated me when I first arrived."

"But he likes you now?"

Micah's lips stretched thin. He didn't say anything.

Annie felt her heart drop in her chest. What he hadn't said was as powerful as the words that had slipped through his lips. Micah didn't know what to do.

She didn't know what to do, either.

They shared a moment, both trying to make decisions that they had no idea of the true ramifications of. They could leave. She knew Micah would go with her.

But he would lose his home. She couldn't make him do that. This was where Micah belonged. His family was here.

Wyatt was her brother-in-law, no matter how much Wyatt wanted to resist the notion of adding to the family. She had to try to find a way to make it work.

She had to be strong and learn all the things that were expected of her in this life. She wanted something more, and she could make something more.

This ranch could be a safe haven, but she had to make up her mind

and fight for it.

It was in that moment that her decision was made. She would keep this place and her husband. She wouldn't let herself be driven away. She would fight for her place in this world.

Except for Wyatt, everything here was perfect. She just had to find a way to make him like her.

Micah opened his eyes to the sun starting to pour in through the bedroom window. He had slept in, which was pretty rare for him.

But it would just end up being another thing Wyatt would hold against him. And he didn't want that to happen.

Micah jumped out of bed and started to dress quickly. He was ready for the day by the time he realized that he had been calling out for Annie to get ready and she wasn't answering.

The bed was empty. She wasn't in there. His heart skipped a beat, not knowing where she could be.

He rushed even faster, tripping over his own feet as he hurried out the door and down the front steps of the house that he had built with his own hands.

He rushed around, trying to find his wife. It took nearly five minutes for him to find her in the garden with Beatrice.

Micah felt like he could breathe again. She was safe and still there. He stopped to watch the ladies work.

They hadn't noticed him standing there yet. They were discussing how to tell when vegetables were ripe and the right way to pick from the plant so as not to damage vines and branches that could grow fruit multiple times in a season.

Annie seemed eager to learn the new skill, and he watched them for a couple of minutes, soaking in the smiles that seemed so easy for Annie as she worked with Beatrice.

Micah considered sneaking away and had actually turned to leave when he heard his name called and turned back around to see Annie waving at him.

“You’re awake finally, sleepy head.”

Her eyes were bright and she was smiling so wide, it made him grin. “You should have woken me up.”

“You looked like you needed the sleep.”

Beatrice nodded. “She just wanted to make sure she did it right next time. I offered to help.”

“I’m glad she’s got the help.” Micah nodded. “Thank you, Bea.”

Beatrice laughed. “Don’t worry about it. Annie is an amazing woman.”

“You don’t have to say that about me.” Annie shook her head. “I’m just trying the best I can.”

Micah stepped up next to her. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Don’t you have chores to do?” Beatrice tried to shoo him off.

He didn’t want to leave. There were chores to do, but he wondered how long he could put them off for.

He was just so relieved Annie seemed resigned to stay on the ranch with him. He wanted to keep her away from Wyatt and was trying to work out a way to keep her smiling and laughing like she was working with Beatrice.

“Let me get you two some coffee, at least.”

“Coffee sounds nice,” Beatrice agreed.

Annie frowned softly. “I should have made you coffee this morning.”

“You don’t need to make me coffee every morning. I can handle that on my own.” Micah laughed, waving off her worries.

This seemed to comfort Annie and her smile returned. “Thank you.”

“I’ll be right back.” Micah walked off from the two women, and they started chatting again as he left.

He could hear them discussing what it was like to live here, with Annie asking a thousand questions about the neighbors and everyone else in the town.

Micah made a mental note to take his new wife into the small town so she could see the sights. It wouldn’t be as nice as the city Annie was used to, but he could still find something fun for them to do.

He started planning the day trip while he made the coffee, wondering what she would enjoy most. As he pictured the happy look on her face, he couldn’t help but smile.

She was beautiful when she smiled. He still couldn’t believe just how lucky he was to have someone like Annie in his life.

As he walked back out of the house with two steaming mugs of coffee in his hand, he was greeted by the women rushing up to him to take the coffee. “You two are eager.”

“I forgot to eat this morning,” Annie admitted.

“I should have brought some biscuits out.” Micah frowned.

“I can go get some from the main house.” Beatrice didn’t wait for them to respond to the offer before she turned back to the house to fetch them.

Annie and Micah were left alone now. They could talk about what was going on, but Micah couldn't figure out what to say.

Annie was so radiant that it took the words right out of his mouth. Instead, he stood there and stared at her.

She blushed.

He assumed she knew what he was thinking, and it made him flush as well.

She cleared her throat, and Micah smiled at her. "How's the coffee?"

She took her first sip. "It's good. Thank you."

"I'm sure you make better coffee."

She laughed. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Most people don't like cowboy coffee."

"I used to make strong coffee before my shift at the factory." She shrugged. "It's not bad before a hard day at work."

"Are you planning on working all day?"

"However long Beatrice can teach me the ropes. Wyatt may need her again." Her expressions soured slightly as his brother's name crossed her lips.

Micah wanted to get her to smile again. "Let's not worry about that. If Beatrice gets called away, you can come and find me and I'll help you out."

"I know you've got your own chores to do. I couldn't bother you."

"You never bother me." Micah shook his head. "I don't think you could even if you tried."

She laughed. "Are you challenging me?"

"Only if it gets me more time near you."

She blushed again.

He couldn't get enough of the sight of her like that, a blushing bride that loved him for everything that he had to offer. He may not have had much in the world.

He didn't have land or family or connections, but he had the love of Annie and nothing else mattered. He would do anything to make her happy.

She was his world, having brought him a light he'd never thought he would be worthy of.

"What's wrong?" Annie's voice broke into his love-drunk stupor.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Are you sure? You've got an odd look on your face."

Micah's grin widened. "I'm just taking in my beautiful wife and remembering how lucky I am."

They continued chatting until Beatrice showed up with some eggs and toast. It wasn't the biscuits that they had been promised, but that didn't matter.

He barely paid attention to the food that was shoveled into his mouth before he had to get to work on the farm.

Wyatt was waiting for him with a frown. "You're late."

Those two words caused Micah's stomach to sour. "I was checking in on Annie."

Wyatt's scowl deepened. "Why would that make you late?"

"Because I wanted to see how she was working with Beatrice."

"Beatrice has her own chores to do."

"You don't have to snap at me." Micah reeled back. He didn't like where this conversation was going.

"She shouldn't even be here. She doesn't know anything about ranching."

"She can learn all of that."

Wyatt shifted in his saddle. "Let's just get to work. We can talk about your mistakes later."

"This isn't a mistake." Micah shook his head. "I can't believe you would say something like that."

"If you don't like people pointing out your mistakes, then don't make them," Wyatt grunted as he started to ride away.

Micah caught up with his brother. "You can't just say things like that to people."

"I think I just did."

Micah hadn't thought his brother was capable of this much cruelty. He didn't know what to say anymore.

He didn't know how to stop this. But he knew something had to be said. "Just leave her alone and give her time."

"I told you that you could have backed out of this ages ago. Why didn't you listen to me? Now everything's changing and she's wasted a ton of money that we needed to keep this place running."

“You’re making it sound worse than it was.” Micah shook his head.
“We’re going to be fine.”

“We shouldn’t have to settle for just fine. You should just get your head out of the clouds and face the truth.”

Wyatt started to herd the cattle, leaving their conversation in the dust.
“This ranch could be doing so much better.”

“The ranch isn’t hurt by her. She’s helping and learning the ropes.”

“She needs to learn faster.” Wyatt didn’t seem willing to budge at all.

The morning had gone from amazing to terrible in the span of five minutes.

Micah knew this had to be fixed, but it didn’t seem like there was a way to get Wyatt to understand that Annie made him happy.

Annie's days were spent learning how to care for the garden and the chickens. It had taken some time for her to learn everything she needed, but every day her confidence grew.

She felt like she could do anything on the ranch, given enough time. Beatrice had even told her what a good job she was doing and she was happy to share her progress when she met Micah for lunch each day.

He had always made the time to come and eat with her. He hadn't missed a single meal with her in the past three weeks that she had spent mastering her main chores.

When Micah came to meet her for lunch that day, she found herself finished with everything she had been assigned for the day.

It was fairly easy, and she didn't have anything left to do.

But Micah still met her for lunch. "How was your morning?" His smile was so bright that it made her happy.

"It was good. I'm done for the day."

Micah laughed. "We're going to have to find something new for you to do."

"We should. Is there anything else I could learn?" Annie tilted her head. This seemed like the perfect time to ask for some more responsibilities.

“What are you wanting to learn?”

“I don’t know. I think I’ve mastered taking care of the chickens and working the garden, but there’s got to be more for me to do.”

“You can always do household chores.”

Annie frowned slightly. “Am I going to be relegated to housework? I already know how to do all of that.”

“I know you do. I wasn’t suggesting that.” Micah shook his head.

She sighed. “I was just hoping I would be able to prove myself. I know Beatrice does household chores and makes dinner in the afternoons. I’ve been helping her, but there has to be something else that I can do.”

Her hands moved automatically, handing him a cup of warm stock with some bread. She had spent hours simmering it and then canning it for winter.

Micah had enjoyed it when it was fresh, and he grinned at her. “I never was a broth man before you came along.”

“Are you just humoring me?”

“No, you really do something special with it.” He shook his head. “I look forward to seeing everything you can do in the kitchen.”

“I had to learn to cook recently. My mother wasn’t much help, but I managed to get some lessons from the maid before we had to fire her.”

“I think you deserve all of those luxuries. If I could give it to you, I would,” Micah announced.

Annie felt a blush rise up on her cheeks again. Whenever Micah told her how much he cared about her, she felt so special.

He meant the world to her. Their time together was magical. She knew she would never leave.

And it helped that she rarely ran into Wyatt anymore. The man seemed content to ignore her.

Annie wondered if her husband had said something to his adopted brother to get the older man to leave her alone. Even if it wasn't that, she was grateful for the peace.

Still, Wyatt crossed her mind every once in a while. She was worried he would come out of nowhere and berate her for another mistake.

She tried to avoid those thoughts, which always made her jumpy and oversensitive. Wyatt's presence in her mind caused her to second-guess every action and assume she had made a thousand little mistakes that she just couldn't see.

It wasn't good for her to worry so much, but there was no helping it. It just came in waves whenever she felt just a little too happy.

Micah was watching her face carefully. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He sighed, but didn't ask any more questions.

She was fine with that. She wouldn't know how to answer him, anyway. There were a thousand questions that found their answers without really being asked.

She would give it time and they would discover more about their love and the ways they both made it through the trials of this world.

Annie was determined to make the best out of the situation no matter how bad it got.

Micah nibbled on his food. "It's going to get better."

“It’s already getting better. We just have to put the work in.”

Micah smiled at her. “I’m glad you’re here to remind me of that.”

She smiled back. “I want to learn something new.”

“Do you think you’re ready for it?”

Annie nodded. “I want to be able to pull my weight. And you never know when you’ll need someone to help with other work around here.

“I can do that. I’m not some weak rich girl, not anymore.”

Micah reached up and brushed the hair out of her face. His touch was warm. “I know you’re not. How about you learn how to mend fences today?”

“I can do that.” She got up in a hurry.

Micah laughed and motioned toward the barn. “Let’s get you on a horse.”

Annie had been staring at his bright blue eyes. They were entrancing, but when she heard him say those words, she froze. “A horse?”

“A horse, yes. You’ve got to ride out to the fences.”

She didn’t know what to think about that. She had never ridden a horse. She hadn’t even touched a horse before.

It seemed like such a simple concept, but fear gripped her chest, threatening to stop her heart.

Micah was watching her reaction. He must have realized why the fear danced across her face.

He ran his hand through his shaggy black hair and she made a mental note to give him a haircut soon.

"I can teach you," he offered, and she nodded her agreement.

Annie was excited by the prospect as he led her to the barn and slowly talked her through saddling the horse and climbing on it. He walked her slowly over the land, helping her get the balance that being mounted required.

She could feel the tightness in her muscles. It took effort to hold herself up in the saddle, especially when the horse began moving.

She felt like she was going to fall off at any moment, and it led to a few panicked moments where she thought she couldn't stay upright.

Right when she was certain she was going to slip off, she felt Micah's hand. He was walking beside the horse, carefully directing it while he made sure Annie didn't fall.

She was comforted by the actions her husband took. Micah was always so gentle with her. Moments like that told her that she had made the right choice.

She had done what felt right and now she had everything in life to live for. Her mother had been so terribly wrong, telling her that Annie would end up coming back home.

She never was going to leave. This was the place where she belonged. With Micah.

And as she grew more comfortable on the steed, Micah gave her more and more room to practice steering the animal.

"You're getting it," Micah celebrated.

"I think I'm all right now."

"Good. Try not to get ahead of yourself."

"I like to think that's what's brought me the best things in life." Annie

laughed.

The horse shifted as it stood, but Annie didn't let it panic her this time. She really was getting used to it.

Micah seemed amused. "I think you're ready to ride on your own. Let's head out to the fence."

"Is there one that needs work now?"

"There's always one that needs work. We just need to find it."

Annie nodded. "How fast do horses move?"

"It depends on how you're riding."

She looked down at the horse, then back up at Micah. He didn't seem to want to answer her. Probably because he knew that she would do something foolish.

He was absolutely right.

She had seen horses gallop before, and she wanted to feel that wind in her hair.

Her mind danced over the freedom that she had read about in books, the way a galloping horse made people feel alive.

And she spurred the horse to move faster before Micah could stop her.

Micah's heart raced. He didn't know if Annie could handle the mare at a gallop, but he did know she was brand new on horseback.

He followed her, spurring his horse forward. The ground passed beneath them, but Micah didn't pay much attention to where they were heading.

His black hair whipped around his face and knew that she might have trouble seeing as wisps of golden hair started to free itself from the hair pin.

She was laughing as the horse moved quickly over the land. Micah saw his wife as a spirit of the west, a shining example of pure joy as she giggled wildly.

Her hair fell down around her shoulders, coming down out of the bun she had pulled it into this morning. The shimmering locks cascaded around her head like a halo.

She was his angel. He didn't always know if he said the right things to her, but there was still something about her that called out to him.

She was special, and it felt like everyone that looked at her could see it. And this felt like it was heaven once he realized she was actually able to handle herself on horseback.

He grinned as they snaked through the grounds of the ranch. The

wide-open spaces were crossed by the fast-moving animals and their riders.

The horses knew the land. Micah didn't worry about that. They would be able to keep them on a clear path because Annie wasn't steering them.

Annie didn't stop her ride until she found a small clearing dotted with flowers. She pulled on the reins and the horse slowed down.

She turned around and rode slowly back into the clearing.

Micah slowed his own horse next to hers. They paused for a moment to look at each other.

She went to dismount, but slipped. The mare chuffed and snorted, causing Annie to nearly lose her grip. She managed to slow her fall by grabbing the saddle horn.

Micah hopped off his own mare and caught her in his arms. "Be careful."

"I guess I still have a little bit to learn." She grinned at him.

He felt his heart race. "Most new riders can't gallop on the first day, so I'd say you did really well."

"I tried." Annie shrugged. "I don't know much about riding."

"You did just fine. I wouldn't worry about anything." Micah shook his head as he put her on the ground. "I was a little worried you would fall."

"I think I need to stop here for a while."

Micah nodded. "Take it easy. You're probably going to be sore tomorrow."

“I can feel how much work it is.”

“They call it saddle soreness,” Micah explained. “Riding looks a lot easier than it actually is.”

She nodded.

Micah took her hand, and she didn’t pull away from him.

Instead, Annie gathered her skirts up and pranced over to drop onto a soft patch of grass. She dragged him along with her until she found a place to sit.

Her hands ran through the blades, soaking in the excitement that surrounded her.

Micah plopped down next to her on the ground. “You look so happy.”

Annie beamed up toward the sky. The sunlight fell over her shoulders like a cape. “I never knew how it would feel.”

Micah could barely concentrate on what she was saying.

It took a moment for his mind to translate what she was saying into words he could understand, but before his mind could make sense of it, he had already asked a question he worried would make him look like a fool. “What?”

“Riding. It’s like there’s nothing in the world that can stop me.” She looked up at the sky. “It feels amazing.”

“I feel the same way.” He took in the soft smattering of freckles across her cheeks as her brown eyes glittered with excitement.

Micah found himself completely enamored by this woman. His heart caught in his throat. “I can’t believe you’ve never ridden before.”

“There wasn’t much need for it in the city. We could walk anywhere

we wanted to go,” Annie explained.

“I can’t imagine ever living someplace where things are so close together.” Micah shook his head in disbelief. “If we had to walk everywhere, we would never get anything done.”

“I doubt you could walk from one end of the ranch to the other in a day.”

Micah laughed. “It takes half a day to do it.”

“That’s less than I thought. It took me half an hour to walk to the factory.”

“What was it like?”

“The factory?” Annie tilted her head.

Micah almost lost his breath once again. The inquisitive smile on her face was captivating. It took him a moment before he could find his words.

“Yes, the factory.”

She smiled. “It was dirty and exhausting. Hard work every day, covered in a layer of smoke and dust that gave everything around it the tinge of death.”

“That’s a beautiful way to describe something so ugly.”

Annie laughed. “I don’t know how else to describe it.”

“You have a way with words. I’ve never had much need to make things sound so pretty.”

She nodded. “I had a good education.”

Micah smiled at her. “I didn’t have much schooling.”

“I was in school up until my family lost its fortune.” Her explanation felt reserved. “My father paid for the best tutors.”

“It must have hurt to lose it all.”

She sighed. “I was nearly an adult by that time. I had to find a way we could survive. So I started working. There wasn’t much I could do.

“I had the education, but my family no longer had the kind of standing to let me get work outside of a factory,” she told him.

Micah nodded. “Beatrice used to take in washing to do when she needed a few extra pennies.”

“She really cared about you all.”

“Father paid her well.” Micah shrugged. “But sometimes she wanted to buy something for herself. She had a weakness for the good chocolates.”

“I do, too,” Annie whispered conspiratorially.

“Did you take in washing to pay for it?” Micah’s eyes danced excitedly as they talked.

“I tried that, but I was never much good at washing.” She shrugged. “The factory was exhausting. I couldn’t handle much more than that, but I became quite the seamstress.”

“You sewed?”

“It was something I learned in school, but it wasn’t like that in the factory. We were sewing clothes to go into shops and there was a lot that needed to be done.”

“So you couldn’t take your time?”

“I had to sew the same pattern for hours upon hours every day. It all

started to blend together, if I'm honest."

Micah frowned. "That sounds terrible."

"It kept food on the table and whiskey in my father's glass."

"Did your father drink a lot?" Micah straightened up. She had never gone into much detail, but he knew a thing or two about it. She had mentioned it in passing.

He had never asked, but he wanted to know more about her.

She paused for a moment, biting her lower lip.

Second thoughts invaded Micah's mind. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ask you something that bothered you."

"It doesn't bother me. Not like that." She shook her head. "I just don't know how to explain it.

"After we lost everything, my family changed. They weren't like my family anymore."

"Oh, I see."

"They used to be so loving," her explanation continued. Her face dropped with sadness. "When we lost everything, they didn't know how to deal with it.

"They wouldn't work or do anything to bring money in."

He felt her pain. It filled him. He didn't hurt that badly when he thought about the pain in his own past. For some reason when she hurt, it hurt him, too.

He wanted to fix it somehow and make her life better. There wasn't much he could do to take her pain from the past away. All he could do was make her future better every day.

He wanted to make himself someone she could count on no matter what. Jack had shown him how to support someone and he knew he could be that for her.

“That must have been hard.”

“Not as hard as your life must have been.”

Micah shook his head. “I lost my family, but you lost your family and then still had to live with them.”

She smiled weakly. “That’s one way to put it.”

“I’m sorry to bring it up.” He hated to see that pain suck the joy out of her eyes. He wanted to make it better.

Micah had the urge to fix all of her problems, even if he had no idea where he would even start. Everyone had pain, but Annie didn’t deserve to hurt in the way that she had.

“I don’t mind talking about it, but it isn’t a very happy memory to think of my parents like that. I’d rather think of them before our lives fell apart.

“My mother used to be the light of the world, shining for everyone to see. She would entertain and dance and laugh. I loved those days.”

Annie’s smile widened. “That’s how I want to remember my life. A life before hardship found me.”

“Hardship finds everyone.”

“I know you had it worse.”

Micah shook his head. “Jack made sure I was loved. He kept me fed and clothed. He kept me happy.”

“But you still had Wyatt?”

“Wyatt always had a little trouble accepting me. I think because it was so soon after he lost his mother.”

Annie frowned. “Maybe he’ll understand that we’ve all lost things.”

“I doubt that would change anything. I had lost both of my parents before Jack took me in. Jack became my father and Wyatt and I learned to live together.

“He’s my brother, but I know he doesn’t like thinking of me that way. He would rather I just did my job and stayed out of his way. We don’t talk much.”

“That must have been lonely.”

“Beatrice helps smooth both of our rough edges. She has for years.”

Annie laughed. It was a sound that bubbled in his ears like a babbling brook. “She’s a good woman.”

“Like a mother to us both.”

Annie nodded. “Is that why you make sure she’s taken care of?”

“After so long as an employee, she became family. Practically raised me and Wyatt. Jack brought her to the house not long after I arrived—I think he needed the extra help once his wife was gone.”

Annie bit her lip. “You were lucky to have a family.”

“I was lucky to have two families that loved me.”

“But now you’ve lost Jack.”

Micah sighed, laying back onto the grass. “I did, but that’s all right. Sometimes we lose people. This is still my home and Wyatt is family whether he likes it or not.

“I wouldn't let it worry you much,” he added.

“I'll try not to.”

Micah looked up at her as she looked down on him. Her eyes were like a blanket with the way they warmed him. “Good.”

Annie leaned in close and Micah felt his breath quicken again. Every time she was close to him he had a physical response.

She smelled like wild flowers and sunshine. He could sink into the scent of her skin and wallow there forever.

Her lips met his. The kiss was pure perfection. Micah fell even harder for his wife and worried a bit that his heart would stop.

Still, he would be fine if he died with her lips on his like that.

She pulled away, that glittering joy dancing in her eyes.

He stood up, pulling her up to her feet.

Then he pulled her into a dance. There was no music and he didn't know the steps, but it didn't seem to matter as they both laughed, two young people in love enjoying the sun as it beat down on them.

They were meant to be, and somehow they had managed to come together across thousands of miles to find this perfection.

Annie giggled as Micah tried to dance. He seemed so happy.

She couldn't deny that she felt the same way.

It didn't matter that he had never been in a ballroom before. This was perfect. This was love like she had never known existed before this.

She had heard about it in stories, had read about it in books, but she had never known that a man like Micah had existed. It didn't seem possible.

But across the country from the place she had been born, here he was. And he was dancing badly in the sunshine. "I love this."

"I don't think I've ever danced before," Micah admitted. "At least, not like this."

She laughed. "I could tell." Annie didn't care if he could dance or not. What mattered was how happy she was laughing with him in a field of flowers.

She tried to commit every bit of the scene to her memory so she could carry it with her for the rest of her days. She knew what a moment like this was worth, having already lost so many of them.

She twirled, feeling his hands around her waist. He couldn't keep up, but it didn't matter. Annie just wanted to be with him.

"I wish I could impress you with my fancy feet." He tried to dip her.

She nearly fell, but came back up laughing. Her arms hung around his neck, and his eyes gazed down into hers.

Micah grinned like a fool and they shared another kiss, deepening their bond once again. Each kiss brought them closer to a perfect marriage.

"You impressed me long before you started to dance." She shook her head. "I just enjoy spending time with you."

"Then keep dancing with me." He pulled her close again.

Her head rested on his shoulder. He was warm and solid and smelled like nature. He was someone that she could count on, could rest her hopes and dreams on. He was her world.

They shared a moment basking in each other's warmth before Micah's voice broke the silence. "We should get back to the house soon."

"I wish we had more time."

"I'll make more time to spend with you. I know it's hard with me gone in the pastures all day."

"That's why I wanted to learn to mend the fences."

"I'm still going to teach you," Micah promised her. "I'll teach you everything you need to know to keep a place here."

She couldn't stop the joy from seeping into her feet as she danced. Her feet picked up and she twirled around Micah. .

She moved to impress him, to show him how much she cared and how happy his words had made her.

Micah tried to keep up, but he hadn't grown up in ballrooms or with wealthy people surrounding him. He had grown up dancing and singing around a fire in the American West and it was a different

movement.

She didn't care. She just wanted to bask in their shared love and let it wash over her. Micah gave her a new life, offering her a chance to be reborn into happiness.

A cloud passed over their dance, but Annie didn't care about that. She wanted to keep being happy with Micah.

He glanced up at the sky for a moment, then stopped moving. "It may rain soon."

"We should probably get to work."

"I don't want to have you out in the rain. You could get sick."

His first concern always seemed to be her happiness and health. She blushed.

He smiled at her. It ripped the air right out of her lungs when he looked at her like that, the expression in his blue eyes and in the way his shaggy hair nearly covered them when he turned his head a certain way.

He was handsome, but her attraction to him went far deeper than just the surface. Micah had a soul that sang out to the heavens. To her, he was an angel.

She trusted him to provide anything she needed. She hadn't realized trust could still exist for her, not after she had lost so much in her life.

It had left her feeling like the ground was unsteady under her feet, like the world could change again in an instant. And it had—but this time, it was Micah making her life better instead of a turn of fate that left her struggling to keep her head above water.

Her face brightened. "I'll be fine."

Micah drew her back in and they shared another mind-blowing kiss.

As they pulled apart, the rain started to gently fall from the sky. Annie tried to put her hair back up into the bun, but the raindrops plastered it to her skin.

Micah took her hand. "We can deal with that later. Let's get you inside."

She let him lead her to the horse and help her climb up into the saddle. He was on his own mount a moment later.

Annie started the horse forward.

Micah took the lead. "Be careful, don't run."

"I don't plan to." The ride back was starting to feel unsteady. She was sure the horse felt it, too. The beast seemed skittish. "Is the horse going to panic?"

"Probably not. Just take it easy, though, it can sense when you're nervous."

"I don't think that's what's going on."

"That's exactly what's going on," Micah explained. "They sense your feelings. It's going to be just fine, I promise, but you have to trust me. Just trust me."

"I trust you." She nodded. "When we get back, I'll make a nice stew."

"Beatrice will probably have some on the stove already."

"I can cook it when we get back to our house. Beatrice has been helping me learn how to cook." Annie wanted to do something.

She hadn't actually learned the skill they had set out to learn. They had gotten distracted by dancing in a clearing, enjoying each other's

company.

They had talked instead of doing the things that needed to be done. She didn't mind it, but knew Wyatt would be upset that they hadn't finished the work.

Wyatt took up far too much space in her thoughts. She wanted to focus on the blossoming love that she shared with Micah, but Micah's brother kept haunting her.

He kept her worried about losing her livelihood.

Micah turned back to her. "I'm sure you'll be a wonderful cook."

"I need some more practice."

"I'll gladly let you practice on me." He grinned at her.

He looked mischievous when he smiled at her like that, like a cowboy from the novels she read as a young woman, just as she came of age.

They had excited her, reading of bandits and wild lands. Back then, she never would have thought she would end up living in a ranch out west.

The rain started to come down heavier. Annie could feel it weighing down her dress, her skirts starting to stick to the sides of the mare she rode. "I enjoy riding."

"Even in the rain?" Micah teased her.

"Even in the rain." She snickered. "The ladies my mother met with used to talk about going to the country and riding, but I never took a liking to it."

"You were lucky you never had to. Most younger riders fall off at least once."

“Were you worried I would fall off the horse?” She tilted her head.

Micah nodded. “I was a little worried, but you seemed able to handle yourself. I’m proud of you.”

She puffed up with pride, but the dress weighed down her shoulders, making her slouch again right away. A soreness was forming in her legs and stomach from sitting upright in the saddle.

She was definitely going to be aching when morning came, but it didn’t matter. Even in the rain she felt like she was in seventh heaven, enjoying the moment with her husband.

He offered her a proud smile, riding right next to her. “Don’t worry, it won’t take long.”

Annie studied the surroundings but didn’t recognize where they were. “I don’t even know how far we rode.”

“It was only a minute or two at a gallop, it should take less than ten to get home riding slower.” Micah turned his horse slightly. “It’s just this way.”

“I’m glad you know your way around.”

He laughed. “Well, it would be embarrassing if I lost my way around this ranch. I’ve been here most of my life.”

“I know, I’m just trying to find the right things to say.”

“I feel like I lose words around you sometimes,” Micah confessed. “But I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“I wouldn’t, either.” Annie shook her head. “I love this place. It’s so beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you.”

Annie felt the heat rise up on her cheeks. She shifted in her saddle, but stopped herself when it started to feel unsteady.

She was starting to forget that she was on the back of a horse, which could only be a good sign for how easily riding would come to her with some practice. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me for anything," he told her.

She reached out and touched his arm. It took some awkward reaching because his horse was a foot or so away from hers.

"I need to thank you for everything. You've done so much for me. I don't think I'll ever be able to repay you for all of it."

He looked at her carefully, but before he could respond, lightning cracked across the sky.

The horses whinnied loudly, and Annie had trouble keeping her mount from riding off wildly in a random direction. She didn't notice Micah until she heard the thud of him hitting the ground.

Her heart stopped. Time seemed to slow down around her as she turned her head to look at her husband. Fear seized her.

She screamed, but the sound was drowned out as the rain started to fall down around her harder. She reached for him, nearly falling out of her saddle as she stumbled toward him.

Her mind wouldn't think. Nothing made sense. The world stopped turning. All she could focus on was the limp form of Micah in front of her.

Her heart was shattering in slow time, each heartbeat taking an hour and throwing off a few more shards of pain as her world fell down around her.

She scrambled to her feet, trying to get to Micah, but it felt like she

wasn't covering any ground.

He wasn't moving, eyes open and just staring at the sky. She was almost certain he was dead. Then, she saw him stir. He was still alive.

Somehow, he had survived that fall from the horse. She didn't know how. The thud had been so loud. It was still echoing in her ears.

Micah tensed before he hit the ground. He knew it was going

to hurt, but the pain didn't hit him at first. It was still a huge shock when his body thudded against the hard dirt.

He shuddered and his vision got cloudy. All he could see was blue. The sky. He realized he had to be looking up at the sky.

The horse was riding off. He could hear the hooves but couldn't speak. He wanted to tell Annie to catch the horse and leave him behind, but the air wouldn't fill his lungs.

He heaved for breath, trying to make himself say something to Annie.

His senses were barely there, it took too long for him to figure out anything that was happening. All he could focus on was that everything hurt.

He had fallen off horses before. It was always a shock when Micah had to pick himself up. But this time was different.

He wasn't sure he could pick himself up this time. He tried, falling back on the ground with a grunt of agony. Micah couldn't believe this had happened to him.

He wasn't sure Annie would know what to do or if she even could, if he tried to explain. He couldn't breathe, the breath expelled from his lungs when he hit the ground.

Annie must have jumped off her horse and run to him because he could feel her arms wrap around him.

Though he wanted to say something, to tell her he was fine, he couldn't form the words. It was too confusing.

She was saying something, but the blood was rushing into his ears and he couldn't do much about it. Her hand squeezed his as his senses started to return to him.

Her voice started making sense. She was repeating his name, over and over. He tried to pull himself up but didn't manage to do it.

"Can you move?" Annie asked, sounding worried.

"I'll be fine." Micah managed to cough out the words, hoping Annie wouldn't ask him any more questions until he managed to catch his breath.

He put his hand up, trying to slow her down, but it didn't work. Annie still seemed to have a million questions rattling around.

Micah kept his hand up, trying to signal her.

Finally, Annie stopped and looked at him. "What do you need me to do?"

"Stop. Just please stop. Give me a second."

"What? What is it?" Her panicked voice broke Micah's heart.

"I'm fine." Micah tried to pick himself up, and Annie quickly moved to help him.

Working together, they managed to get him on his feet. Annie's shoulders were under one of his arms and she stumbled.

"You can't carry me." Micah tried to pull away from her.

Annie didn't let him get away. "I'll make it. I'm strong enough."

Micah frowned. His side hurt. Actually, if he was honest, everything hurt.

He wasn't sure where the injuries actually were and how much of the pain was just bruising because of the fall onto hard ground.

Annie was mumbling to herself, her voice tinged with worry. Micah hated that he was the cause of Annie's pain, but he couldn't do much to assuage her worries.

He couldn't act like normal, the pain and shock were just too much for him to handle. He groaned as she helped him.

"Wait. The horse," he realized.

"I'll find it after I get you back to the house."

Micah frowned. "We can't just leave it to run off."

"I'm not leaving you. We can find the horse afterwards." She shook her head and led her over to her own mare. That horse had stuck around.

The horse Micah had picked out for her was known for her gentle demeanor and wouldn't run away because of a lightning strike. Micah's horse was far more wild.

His thoughts were starting to come clearer, but Micah couldn't get his body to work the way he wanted it to. His back hurt badly, making it hard to walk.

His sides ached and it felt like he was being stabbed in his thighs. None of these were good signs, but he didn't know exactly what was wrong with him.

Annie slipped in the mud, causing Micah to fall back down.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She leaned over him, trying to help Micah back up.

He waved her off. "Just give me a moment."

Annie looked so guilty it actually hurt Micah's chest. He shook his head at her. "Don't feel bad. This wasn't your fault."

"I was the one that went galloping off without paying attention to the weather. This is my fault." She had tears in her eyes.

"Stop it." Micah's voice was starting to grow stronger. "There was no way either of us could know that lightning was going to strike so close."

Annie sighed. "We need to get you back to the house."

"We should find the other horse."

"I can find it afterwards." She shook her head. "The horse isn't hurt and I'm not going to be able to track it down right now, not like this."

Micah knew Annie was right. He didn't like the idea of leaving the horse out in the rain for so long, but there wasn't much choice in the matter.

He couldn't find the animal on his own, and Annie wasn't good on horseback. She would need help to go out hunting for it.

"I just have to get you on the horse." Annie grunted as she tried to lift him.

Micah laughed softly, then groaned. "I think I'm a little heavy for you."

She offered her hands to support him as he dragged himself onto the horse, then took a minute to catch her breath.

They were both soaking wet. Micah felt the cold starting to soak into his bones and it just made him ache even worse. He could barely keep himself in the saddle.

Annie sat behind him and wrapped her arms around him, and Micah leaned back against her. He was starting to lose consciousness from the pain.

Every step the horse took clouded his vision and made him want to scream. He fought to keep the worst of the pain from Annie.

She needed to focus on getting them home as soon as possible.

He hated having to rely on Annie, but he didn't have much choice. All he could think about was what he should be doing and that he couldn't do anything.

He had to rely on a woman that he had promised to take care of and it hurt his pride.

Annie spurred the horse slightly faster. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, again and again until Micah couldn't even assure her that everything was going to be just fine.

It felt like it took an eternity for them to arrive at the house, but Micah knew it couldn't have been long. It just felt so much longer because every single step the horse took sent shudders of pain through his entire body.

When they rode up to the front porch, stopping right in front of the steps, Beatrice must have noticed the state they were in because the housekeeper rushed out of the house to help Micah get out of the saddle. "What happened?"

Annie explained between shivering breaths while the two women helped Micah into the house. He felt like he had fallen from grace, having to lean on others to limp into the house and be placed on the chair in the front room.

The story was shared quickly, with Annie leaving out the details of what they were doing when they were caught by surprise by the storm.

Wyatt stomped into the front room. “What did you do?” The words were flung as an accusation toward Annie, who shrunk into herself.

Beatrice stepped up but Micah interrupted her. “She didn’t do anything—lightning hit the ground right near my horse and it threw me.”

“We can’t afford for you to be thrown by a horse.” Wyatt stomped to the front door and pulled a jacket off of the rack next to the entrance.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Micah snapped at his brother.

Wyatt grunted as he shrugged the jacket on. “I’ll go find the horse.”

“I can go,” Annie volunteered, but Wyatt seemed to ignore her.

Clearly tense, Beatrice looked between Wyatt, Micah, and Annie.

Wyatt grunted. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll get that horse back. You wouldn’t know what to do.” Micah’s older brother was spitting pure venom.

Micah wanted to put a stop to the fight Wyatt seemed determined to start, but he just didn’t have the strength. His eyes closed and he rested back against the chair.

Beatrice had a deep frown on her face. “I’ve got to get him to bed.”

Annie nodded and got up to help her move Micah down the hallway to the small bedroom on the first floor.

Annie grunted as they shifted Micah onto the bed. At least Beatrice was there to help her, but Micah was still a full-grown man so it was difficult for the two women to move him, even if they were both strong from hard work.

Work at the ranch never seemed to end, and Annie briefly wondered what it would be like without Micah there to help them.

He groaned as he settled into the bed. Annie took notice of how breathless Micah was after having been moved, which wasn't a good sign.

She had seen a few injuries in the factory, always dangerous places. She hadn't expected to see those kinds of wounds here on the ranch.

Micah wasn't cut up, but it certainly hurt him to move. Beatrice pressed softly on Micah's ribs and in response he groaned and tried to curl up in a little ball.

Annie gasped. The look on Micah's face nearly broke her heart.

She wanted to do something to fix it, but there was nothing she could do to magically take away the pain her husband was feeling. "Do you think his ribs are broken?"

"That's what I think. Along with something in his back."

"You think he broke more than some ribs?" Annie chewed on her

lower lip.

She was worried. She would probably spend the rest of her life blaming herself for what had happened there.

She kept thinking about everything that she could have done differently. She had felt so free and had acted wildly.

Her lack of control led to her husband laying there in pain on the bed as Beatrice carefully bandaged him.

Not much was said, and Annie was just fine with that. She didn't know what to say other than spewing out endless apologies, anyway.

Eventually, Beatrice managed to get Micah somewhat comfortable and he shifted his head to look over at Annie.

"Hey." He smiled at her.

"Hey." Her voice felt painfully weak.

"You look like you fell off the horse," he croaked with a soft chuckle.

She shook her head. "It's not that."

"It's not your fault."

Beatrice frowned. "Horses are strange creatures, and loud noises scare them. You can't control lightning, either."

"I had him out with me, though. We should have been back already." Annie rubbed her face with an open palm. "I know I shouldn't blame myself, but I just can't stop it."

The front door opened and Annie winced. She knew it had to be Wyatt walking back into the house. "He's probably still mad."

Beatrice frowned again. "He's always mad."

Boot steps sounded as Wyatt approached the room, and they all fell silent when he walked through the door. Wyatt took a long moment to regard all three of them.

The air had grown heavy, making it hard for Annie to breathe. She tried not to show how nervous she was as Wyatt silently regarded her.

Showing fear to Wyatt would just make him believe that he could get to her.

But Wyatt didn't seem to care how strong she was. "I need to speak to my brother."

"What do you need to talk to me about?" Micah asked.

Wyatt fixed Annie with a death glare. "Alone."

"Why do you want me to leave?" Annie demanded, standing up to her new brother-in-law.

"Because you don't belong here. Just leave and let me talk to my brother."

Micah struggled to sit up. "Anything you say to me can be said in front of her."

"I don't want to make her cry." The thought might have been heartwarming, but the tone in Wyatt's voice was derisive and angry. He didn't want her around him at all.

"I'm going to tell her whatever nonsense you're on about, anyway. We both know it's not true," Micah snorted, laying back down.

Wyatt frowned. "If you want her to stay that badly, she can, but she's probably just going to break down."

Annie had felt unwelcome before, but Wyatt was being extraordinarily cold. She didn't know why he kept Micah around, with all the bad

blood that clearly existed between them.

“I’ll be fine.” She kept her voice from wavering. Annie didn’t know where she managed to get that strength from, but she was grateful for it.

“I’m not going to break just because of what you do,” she added.

Wyatt frowned, ignoring her for now and turning back to his brother. “She doesn’t want to hear what I’ve got to say.”

“She’s not leaving.” Micah shook his head. “We already discussed this.”

Wyatt snorted. “Your romantic notions don’t change the truth. She doesn’t know how to live in these parts. She’s just going to end up leaving you.”

Annie stepped forward. “I’m not leaving Micah. I love him.”

“You don’t love him,” Wyatt scoffed. “You just want the money the ranch brings in so you can blow it on drink and gambling.”

“I would never do that. I’m here to learn and work here.”

“She’s only been here a few days. You have to give her a chance, Wyatt.” Micah sounded agitated, but he was calmer than Annie was.

Annie felt a storm of emotions roiling around inside of her. It made her want to vomit and scream and stomp all at the same time. Emotions were never easy to handle.

She preferred to just work hard to fix problems, but this wasn’t something she could just fix. Wyatt seemed determined to hate her for no reason.

“Why do you care?” Micah asked Wyatt. “You’ve never cared about me before.”

He didn't answer that, just turning back to Annie to snap at her. Annie caught a small flash of guilt on Wyatt's face, but it was gone as soon as it appeared, making her wonder if she had even seen it or if it was just wishful thinking.

"I'll take you to the train station myself. There's no sense in breaking his heart later when you can just leave today."

Annie clenched her fists by her side, ready for whatever fight Wyatt wanted to bring her way. She loved Micah and she wasn't going to leave him just because his brother was an overprotective brute of a man.

Beatrice cleared her throat. "I'm just going to go get Micah some water. Annie, do you want to come help me?"

Annie shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Wyatt doesn't scare me."

"That's not what I was saying."

Annie knew Beatrice was lying, trying to get her out of there. While she didn't blame the housekeeper for trying to save her, Annie didn't want to be saved.

Wyatt was cruel, but it seemed like a bad idea to give in to him.

He scowled at Annie. "You don't belong here, city girl. Why don't you just go back home and leave us be."

"We've been through this before. I'm not leaving. I'm learning everything I can as fast as I can.

"And you're just mad because I'm actually doing it when you thought I wouldn't, so you're blaming me for everything."

"I wouldn't blame you if it wasn't your fault."

"Is it my fault, or do you just need someone to blame for how

miserable you really are?" Annie stomped in her rage.

She didn't know if her accusations were right, but she wanted to say something that got to Wyatt. Maybe if she managed to hit the right buttons the man would crumble and change his ways.

If she fought hard enough to prove that she wasn't just going to leave and hurt everyone, Wyatt might actually accept her.

Annie didn't care if it was just wishful thinking. She needed to do something to show she wasn't someone who would just leave the man she loved because times got hard.

She didn't know why Wyatt would assume she was that type of woman, but she had a feeling it wasn't her that Wyatt actually hated, but rather the man must have been reacting to a pain in his past.

Annie wondered what had caused Wyatt the kind of pain that would lead to behavior like this, but the truth was that it didn't matter.

There was no excuse for the way her husband's older brother was treating her.

Micah was a good man, and she was determined to keep him, but Wyatt's withering gaze held power to intimidate her. She wanted to be someone everyone loved, and Wyatt was determined that she would never feel loved like that.

She tried not to care what he thought, but Annie knew she had to get out of the room before she started to cry. And she had to cover her exit to make it look like she wasn't running away in order to cry her eyes out.

She stormed out of the room, hoping it looked as angry as she felt. Immediately, she rushed to the house she shared with Micah.

She wished she had just brought Micah there and then gone to find Beatrice. It would have saved her from this confrontation.

Wyatt would have found out, she knew, but it was unlikely the man would have had the courage to stomp into Micah's house to attack her.

Micah wrapped his arms around Annie. She was so quiet.

Beatrice had helped Micah get back to their house, where he'd found Annie. His wife was livid. He couldn't blame her for feeling that way.

She had calmed down and come to bed with him after he asked her. But she was still so quiet, obviously troubled.

Micah couldn't blame her for being upset. Wyatt had behaved absolutely monstrously. He still couldn't believe just how foul the man had become.

Micah didn't know why his brother had snapped like that. Annie deserved better.

He sighed, and his wife rolled over to look at him.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment. Annie bit her lower lip, but it didn't hide the fact that it was quivering.

Micah reached up to brush his wife's hair back away from her face. A tear leaked out of her eye and he frowned. "You don't have to worry about him. It's not a problem."

"But he could make us both leave."

"He won't make us leave, I promise."

Annie shook her head. "I'm sorry, but you can't make those promises. You don't know. He wants me gone and I'm sure he's going to do anything he can to get me out of here.

"You don't have any proof that he's not going to just go crazy and leave us both homeless. Maybe I should just leave so you don't lose your home."

"Don't do that. Don't even think about that. Wyatt is my brother. We were raised together. If he just wanted to kick us out, he would have.

"He just wants to be proven right that you'll leave on your own." Micah rambled a bit, talking quickly and running his words together as he tried to comfort his wife.

Annie didn't look like she believed him, but he didn't know what else to say. He didn't have a clue as to how he could actually make this right.

Micah felt like Wyatt had some reason for doing what he was doing, but he hadn't understood when Wyatt had reacted the same way when he had arrived at the ranch with Jack either.

Wyatt had called him a stray back then, telling Micah that he was nothing but a starving dog that was only a drain on life at the ranch.

He frowned, and Annie still didn't speak.

Micah shifted painfully. Every movement seemed to send stabbing pain into his side. It was going to take a while to heal.

He closed his eyes for a moment to gather his thoughts before finally speaking to Annie again. "Wyatt doesn't handle new people well. He reacted the same way to me."

"That's not exactly comforting."

Micah frowned. "I've been here for years. He hasn't pushed me out,

not even after Jack died.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I think it took some time, but he got over it. He’ll get over it with you, too.”

“Doesn’t he still hate you?”

“We just don’t talk to each other anymore.” Micah squeezed his hand, pulling away from her hair.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

Micah smiled softly. “I promise, it’s going to turn out just fine. It always does.”

“I hope so.”

“Don’t just hope. I know that it’s going to be alright. I want you to know that too. I promise, no matter what happens, you’ll always have a home.”

She bit her lip again, and he was captured by the sight of her shy demeanor. It contrasted the fiery attitude she showed to Wyatt when he started to get upset with her.

He realized what it meant. She was truly afraid, but didn’t want to show Wyatt how she really felt. She was honestly afraid of his brother.

Micah was going to torture himself over this until Wyatt relaxed about Annie being around. It would be unforgivable if Wyatt actually managed to drive his wife away.

They lay there, sharing the moment, both deep in their own thoughts. Micah’s own mind seemed to flip around in circles.

Finally, she sighed. “I’ll make it work.”

“I understand if you can’t handle it. He’s being awful and it’s unforgivable.”

“But he’s your family. I’ll handle it, but I refuse to accept the way he treats me.”

“I would never ask you to.”

She nodded, her eyes wandering up to the ceiling. She was staring at the rough hewn rafters that hung above them, and Micah pondered whether he should have painted them.

He shifted and looked up where Annie was staring. There was nothing of any real interest there. “What are you thinking about?”

“Everything.” Annie frowned, not taking her eyes off of the random spot she had picked.

“Do you think about everything often?”

She shrugged. “Mostly about how people can change.”

“Your parents changed a lot, right?” Micah said, thinking about the letters they had shared. There had been stories there.

“For the worse. My mother used to be kind and loving, but when we lost everything, it was terrible. She changed completely.”

“She stayed locked in her room, right?” Micah turned to regard Annie’s expression again.

“When she wasn’t locked in her room, she was fighting with my father. They never used to fight, but they fought all the time after our lives changed so much.”

“Tell me about the happy times.” Micah wanted to bring some joy back to her life.

She sighed. "When I was a kid, she would dance around the living room to the sound of the windchimes. My mother loved windchimes back then.

"She didn't keep windchimes after. Just another thing that changed."

"It must have been nice, dancing like that. We could get some windchimes here."

Annie shook her head. "I think it would just hurt too much. I don't think I could ever look at them again."

Micah shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position to lay in. He still hurt and the pain made it difficult for him to figure out what to say.

He wanted to sleep, but the pain wouldn't let him. He had been hurt on the farm before, though. Accidents happened every so often.

She started. "What's wrong?"

Micah shook his head. "No, I'm fine. Just trying to get comfortable. I'm going to have some trouble getting around for a few days."

"Maybe a little longer."

"I don't want to worry you," Micah admitted, glancing back up at the spot on the ceiling that her eyes were still locked on.

"My mother used to make me hot cocoa when I wasn't feeling well."

"That sounds really sweet of her." Micah felt a smile start to tug on her face.

It must have been a bittersweet memory for Annie, but he found the memory of a real mother touching. "I barely remember my mother at all."

She shifted awkwardly. “You said that in the letters. I felt so bad for you.”

“You don’t have to feel bad for me.”

“You don’t have to feel bad for me, either.”

He laughed lightly, causing a shooting pain in his side. “Are you going to do that to me whenever we fight?”

“We’re not fighting.”

“We’re fighting with Wyatt, we just happen to be on the same side.”

She snorted with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Micah turned his head to look at her again.

She was smiling widely at him. “I love conversations like this.”

“I’m glad we can talk like this. I was worried we wouldn’t be able to talk when we met in person.”

“You can tell me anything. I’m always here to listen to you.”

The way she looked at him made his heart melt. She had such love on her face that he couldn’t stop himself from leaning in to give her a kiss.

She met him halfway, pulling away afterwards as she softly touched his cheek. “You shouldn’t move too much.”

“I couldn’t help it. My beautiful wife is right there.”

A red blush crawled up her cheeks. “You don’t have to say things like that.”

“I wish you could see how beautiful you are. If you could only see

through my eyes.”

He didn't back down. “I don't even know how to explain how lucky I am that you're here. Not only are you beautiful, you're strong and smart, too.”

“You make it sound like I'm perfect.”

“You're perfect for me.”

She shifted uncomfortably on the bed, then got up.

He frowned. “What's wrong? Did I say too much?”

“No, nothing like that.” She shook her head. “I was just going to go make you some hot cocoa. I thought you could enjoy it.”

“I would like that.”

And with that, she was gone, and Micah was left to try to decide if he had somehow said the wrong thing to his wife. Annie was a wonderful woman and he was completely smitten by her, but she was having a bad time of things.

Wyatt was making her miserable and Micah wished he knew the right way to fix this. Her heart was hurting, and he wasn't sure the sadness behind her eyes would ever fade the same way the pain in his bones would heal.

He tried to turn again, an automatic motion to try to get comfortable, but he just ended up groaning in pain and flopping flat on his back.

Annie came rushing back in at the noise. “What happened?”

“I'm fine. Just moved wrong.”

She hurried over to his side. “You need to take it easy.”

“I’m trying to.” Micah forced a smile on his face. “What are you doing?”

“Heating up the milk.” She nodded and shuffled back out of the room, leaving him to his thoughts again.

Annie was a good woman and it didn’t take her very long to finish preparing two mugs of hot milk mixed with chocolate. She put a tray down on the dresser with the two mugs so she could walk over and help Micah sit up.

He tried to shoo her away, but she wasn’t going to let him get away with that. He had to accept her help. She got him into position and handed a mug over to him.

Soon, she was sitting right next to him and the moment felt different now. Annie was worried about him, and she would worry about him no matter what he said.

That was what it meant to have someone love him.

They had become family. Annie was his wife and he was her husband. They were bound together this way.

This was the life that they were meant to have—a series of shared moments where their affection deepened over time.

Annie punched down to the soft dough, working it hard with her fist. Her hand was starting to get sore, but she hadn't managed to work the dough enough to please Beatrice.

The housekeeper had been teaching her how to cook at every meal, giving Annie the opportunity to take home-cooked dishes to Micah every day.

Beatrice laughed. "You haven't made a lot of bread before, have you?"

Annie shook her head. "I probably should have learned before all of this. I feel like such a useless fool sometimes."

"You're doing just fine. It's not hard, it just takes some time to get a feel for it," Beatrice explained in her comforting voice.

Annie stared at the dough in front of her, unsure of what to look for. She had never really seen what this stage of bread was supposed to look like before.

The cooks had always baked the bread, and when her family had lost their fortune, she hadn't had time to learn these skills. Annie had been forced to work long hours, instead.

"Is it all about how the dough feels?"

Beatrice nodded. The housekeeper had been teaching Annie everything she needed to know to be a rancher's wife. It felt like there

was always something new to learn.

“It is, but you’ll get it.”

“I have no idea how it’s supposed to feel.”

“It has to come smoothly off your hands.”

Beatrice showed Annie how it was supposed to look with another batch of dough that they had finished proofing. “Don’t worry if you don’t get it done right at first.”

Annie frowned. “I’d rather not have inedible bread.”

“I doubt you’ll do that. You try too hard to learn these things.”
Beatrice grinned.

Annie laughed softly. “Well, I’m happy to learn. Things are going well here.”

“Even Wyatt has been pretty quiet lately.”

“That’s a good thing.”

Beatrice worked her own dough, looking much further along in the process than Annie was.

Annie tried not to feel a little jealous of the way the other woman could do everything around the ranch. Beatrice had never minded teaching, either.

It was something to be grateful for. Micah and Beatrice had made the effort to make her comfortable even with the owner of the property hating her so much.

It was the only thing that kept her from losing all faith in her new life. There were people here that cared and wanted to see what was special about her.

It would be so easy to wallow in the misery of every interaction with Wyatt, who had become cold and silent in her presence rather than angry and yelling.

Beatrice, on the other hand, had become a ray of sunshine, bringing light into her world whenever Wyatt tried to suck it all away.

And then, there was Micah. They were in love, coming into more joy in marriage.

As she worked the dough, Annie found herself thinking about all the blessings she had in her life at this point. Things had turned out pretty well for her, but it had taken some time to get to where she felt like she could work on her own.

Beatrice cleared her throat. "How's Micah been doing?"

"He's getting back to work, but he's still hurting."

A frown crossed the older woman's face. "I wish there was a way to get him healed faster. He shouldn't be working so hard in the shape he's in."

"I know, but he won't listen to me." Annie shook her head. "That man is so stubborn."

"That makes you a good match for him. You're just as stubborn." Beatrice pointed at Annie with a flour-covered finger, smiling at her own joke.

"Stop doubting the fact that you belong here," the housekeeper added.

Annie was taken aback. "I don't doubt that I belong here."

Beatrice gave Annie a pointed look.

It made Annie realize that Beatrice had been reading her like a book all along. She had been so stuck in her own mind that she didn't

realize how much of herself she had projected out for others to see.

Beatrice didn't seem perturbed, however, rather amused by Annie's surprise at the revelation. Annie stammered for a moment, but was saved by a knock at the door.

The housekeeper walked out of the kitchen, chuckling softly, to answer the door. Annie kept working on the dough while she heard Beatrice greeting the postman.

The conversation didn't take long and Beatrice soon made her way back to the kitchen. "You have a letter."

"A letter?"

"From Boston," Beatrice clarified.

"From home?" Annie frowned and wiped her hands on her apron.

The dough didn't come off easily and she ended up having to roll small balls of the raw bread off her fingers while she glanced at the envelope.

"I'll finish kneading that loaf for you, don't worry. Take your time." Beatrice nodded toward the front room, indicating that Annie could have some privacy with the note if she wanted it.

Annie's heart started to quicken. She didn't say much else to Beatrice, instead walking into the front room and finding it empty.

She was alone, but not so alone that she couldn't call for help if she needed it.

Her fingers fumbled with the letter, wondering what was inside. She recognized her mother's handwriting immediately.

Her heart sank. It was probably another offer to come home.

When she actually got inside the envelope and opened up the letter, she quickly found out that she was right. Her mother wanted her to come home, but there was something else in those words.

Her father had managed to regain his position and find work that allowed him to regain their fortune. There was some mention of an investment that they had thought worthless actually having some worth now, but her mother didn't share many details.

What mattered was that her family had regained their fortune and they wanted Annie to come back home.

She didn't know what to think about what her mother had to say. It was the opportunity to go back to the kind of life she missed, but she also loved Micah.

For a moment she pondered asking Micah to move to Boston with her, but she couldn't drag him away from his life here.

Her doubts didn't last long. She couldn't leave this place. This was where she belonged. She didn't really think about Boston as being home anymore, not really.

The money didn't matter to her. Her parents' true natures had been revealed when they fell on hard times and she understood money and influence were fleeting.

The happiness in her mother's words wasn't guaranteed to last. If her father lost that job or gambled away that money, everything would go back to the same way it was before.

She frowned deeply, trying to decide what to do about the letter. Throwing it out and ignoring it was an option, but she didn't think she could actually do that to her mother.

The woman meant well, even if her mind had been broken by the sudden change in fortune.

Annie crumpled up the letter and tossed it into the fireplace before walking back into the kitchen.

Beatrice regarded her carefully. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong." She started pulling out ingredients for dinner. "Just my mother being my mother."

Beatrice frowned. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry, it's just the way she is. I don't even think she can help it." Annie looked at the spot where she had been kneading the bread.

It looked like Beatrice had already finished it; there was nothing but some flour left on the counter. Annie turned to grab a damp rag to wipe up the mess.

Beatrice stayed silent, drawing in a few breaths before she spoke. The housekeeper grabbed another rag and started to help clean up the counters.

"It's nice to have another woman around here."

"I'm glad to be around."

Annie kept her response vague because she didn't know what else to say. It made her want to shrink into herself, being told that she was helping Beatrice just by existing.

She knew it was supposed to be a compliment, but it still felt strained and odd to hear someone say it.

Annie decided to just accept it the way Beatrice had obviously meant it and not bring up her reservations about being there just to serve as another woman on the ranch.

"I'm serious, those boys have never really gotten along. Wyatt is a

good man, but he doesn't handle change very well. He never has."

Annie wasn't sure what to say after this revelation. She knew Beatrice had to have some idea of what was going on. "What are we going to do for dinner tonight?"

"I was thinking that I'll make some cabbage soup. I made some nice sausage yesterday that should be finished now in the smokehouse."

Annie licked her lips. "That sounds great. I'll go get the sausage."

Beatrice laughed. "I think you just want to check out all the good stuff in there."

"There's always something good going in there. It almost seems like magic how you turn a butchered animal into so many types of meat."

"I wouldn't call it magic."

Annie scoffed. The banter was pleasant and made her feel better. It was still hard to think about the words that her mother had written.

Maybe it was guilt. Annie had left and her family had found their way. Her father had found good work within a few months of her income having been ripped away from them.

"It still feels like that," she responded.

"I can teach you how to do that next if you want me to." Beatrice glanced up and down Annie's form.

Annie wondered if Beatrice would pry further into the letter she had received. "I'd like that. When can we start?"

Annie wanted to learn how to make bacon and sausage. It sounded exciting to her.

And it felt odd to get excited to do something so domestic—there was

a time, long ago, that she wouldn't dare get her hands dirty.

"Next time we butcher a cow or pig." Beatrice shrugged. "It'll probably be a while. We have a good bit of meat preserved."

"That's all right. I've got all the time in the world to learn everything about life here."

Beatrice nodded and soon they had dinner finished and portioned out. Annie brought her part of the meal to the house she shared with Micah.

They avoided actually sitting down to eat with Wyatt because of the tension that had been on the ranch since Annie had arrived.

She enjoyed the quiet dinner alone with her husband, and she barely remembered to write the letter after he was asleep.

She had so many things to say to her mother and she wrote it all down, explaining that she had no intention of going back to Boston.

The ranch was her home now and she was happier here than she had ever been before. Even the memories of the fancy house and the parties she had attended couldn't bring her back to the big city.

She expressed every word of it in her letter, hoping to show her mother exactly what was important to her now. She was going to stay right where she was.

The letter filled several pages, which she tucked into an envelope. She would head into town in a few days to mail it off.

Micah was having trouble waking up as early as he used to.

Being married made it easier to languish in bed instead of rising as soon as he opened his eyes.

Annie made him happier than he had ever been in his life.

But he did manage to get up, stretching his body as he glanced out the window toward the rising sun. He had made a good choice putting the bedroom on this side of the house.

Waking up to the sunrise was always a nice thing.

Annie followed him out of the room and started making coffee, her hair still a mess from sleep. He found it beautiful, stopping for a moment to stare at her.

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” Annie grumbled softly.

He laughed. “You look like you’re ready to go back to bed.”

“Can’t go back to bed, there’s work to do.”

“You can take a break if you need it.”

Annie shook her head. “I should work. Coffee will help me get moving. Don’t worry.”

Micah stuck around long enough to have a sip of the hot fresh life-giving liquid before giving his new wife a kiss on the cheek and making his way out of the house.

Wyatt was waiting for him by the fence. "You're late. As usual."

Micah frowned. "I got here, that's what matters."

"Let's get to work." Wyatt didn't say much else on the matter. There wasn't much more to say.

Micah had told Wyatt that he wouldn't be starting as early anymore and now it seemed like his older brother had ignored it. He frowned as he climbed into the saddle.

"Right, what's the plan today?"

"We need to check the fences."

Micah felt a small rush of guilt. He was supposed to be checking the fences with Annie when he hurt himself.

He had never gotten a chance to teach her how to work on the fences, having barely recovered from his fall from the horse.

He still felt twinges from his side when he moved wrong, but it had healed faster than a broken bone would take, letting him know that it was probably more likely a pulled muscle than something serious.

It had still hurt badly, worse than he had felt in a very long time. He'd had accidents before, but having been stuck in bed for three days barely able to move had left him feeling weak and useless.

He hated having put that on Annie so early. His wife had many reasons to leave—since she had arrived, Wyatt and their circumstances had made life difficult.

He frowned as he rode alongside his brother, not giving more than a

passing glance toward the fence. He had a lot on his mind, thinking about all the wonderful things in his life and how Annie had bent over backwards to take care of him.

The woman deserved so much more than he had been able to give her so far.

They had shared everything about themselves and he found himself trusting her more than anyone, other than Jack. She had become his world.

Wyatt cleared his throat.

The noise drew Micah's attention and he started. "What? I'm sorry, I missed it."

"You weren't paying attention." Wyatt frowned and shook his head. "I think some of the cows are missing."

"What makes you think that?" Micah turned his gaze to the cattle. The animals seemed peaceful, grazing on the fresh green grass and tall weeds of the paddock.

The animals never kicked up much of a fuss. They didn't live lives of stress or pain and Wyatt and Micah always took care of them.

Jack had been convinced that stressed animals made bad-tasting milk and meat. Micah wasn't sure how much he agreed with that assertion, but it was still nice to have animals that weren't always in a near panic due to the humans being awful to them.

Wyatt shrugged. "Not sure, it just doesn't feel like it's as many as we should have. I want to go count heads, just to be sure."

Micah nodded. "I don't mind, better safe than sorry after all."

The pair made their way to the nearest gate and passed into the paddock. Wyatt took the lead, starting to count while Micah started

on the outside, adding up the stragglers.

Within a few minutes, they each had a number to share—a number that was too low.

Micah frowned. “Maybe we missed a few?”

“Check the barn?” Wyatt waved him off.

Micah nodded and rode off to the barn to see if any cows had stayed inside. Inside the building, he searched every stall and darkened corner, checking any place big enough for a young cow to hide, hoping that was all that had happened.

But Micah couldn’t find a single cow, and he finally headed back outside to meet Wyatt by the front of the barn.

Wyatt didn’t look any happier. “I counted them again.”

“Did we count wrong?”

Wyatt shook his head.

Micah glanced around for a moment, trying to think of anywhere else the animals might hide. “What do you think happened?”

“Not a clue.” Wyatt climbed back on his horse, a deep scowl on his face. “But we need to check the rest of the fence.”

“I’ll go outside and ride around.”

Micah imagined his brother was probably pretty frustrated by the missing heads of cattle. It was a lot of money to just disappear like that and it would take a while to recover.

“I’ll ride around on the inside,” Wyatt agreed. They both knew the job; there wouldn’t be much talking necessary between them.

Micah knew Wyatt blamed him for what had happened. He felt at fault, himself.

Annie's love was a distraction that made his life better, but sometimes it felt like he had to relearn everything about life at the ranch.

"When was the last time you checked them?" Wyatt stared at the fence as he asked the weighted question.

"I checked early yesterday."

"How early?"

"Just before dinner." Micah frowned.

Wyatt sighed heavily. "We need to go check the whole fence and see if we can find those cows."

"And any gaps."

Both men headed to the fences. There was a lot of searching to do. Micah and Wyatt split up for a while, each trailing along one section of fence and then meeting up after.

Wyatt had a frown on his face. "Did you find anything?"

Micah shook his head. "No breaks in the fence."

"I didn't find any either." Wyatt cleared his throat. "Did you leave a gate open or something?"

"No. I never leave a gate open." Micah shook his head.

"You've been pretty distracted with that woman lately. I wouldn't be surprised if you forgot about it." Wyatt shrugged.

Micah squinted. He knew what his brother was getting at and he didn't like the implication, but he wasn't sure how to retort to it

without it being turned around on him.

Instead, he just sighed and leaned back a bit in the saddle, slightly shifting his weight. "We'll find out what's going on."

"I hope so. We can't afford to lose those cattle."

A sinking feeling was forming in the pit of Micah's stomach. He didn't know what could have happened to a part of their herd of cattle. Cows didn't just disappear.

Maybe it was rustlers, but suggesting that would just put Wyatt in an even worse mood. He knew Wyatt was thinking about it anyway.

There was no way it wouldn't cross his brother's mind. Wyatt was a smart man, even if he did have problems dealing with other people.

He turned around and started riding out to work on other chores when Wyatt coughed.

Micah looked back at his brother. "Something else wrong?"

"I hope that girl didn't have anything to do with this."

Micah shook his head. He couldn't believe Wyatt would say something like that. It wasn't surprising he might suspect her, but just saying it like that was a bit too far.

"She wouldn't do something like this. I know her too well."

"You barely know her. She hasn't been here long. I know what women like her do." Wyatt crossed his arms, a stern look on his face.

Wyatt was acting like he knew everything about everything.

Micah couldn't take it anymore. He was tired of his brother always thinking the worst of everything that happened in their lives.

He snapped, "What exactly do women like her do?"

"City girls don't like life on the ranch." Wyatt snorted. "You'll see. I'm trying to do you a favor."

"I don't want any favors from you."

"You don't want any, but you need some. You don't have any sense."

Micah shook his head. "You keep calling me stupid for trying to be happy. I think that says more about you than it does about me."

Wyatt frowned, but didn't respond.

Micah took the opportunity to ride away. He had to look for the missing cattle and somehow manage to get the chores done when he was upset at the accusations Wyatt had made about his wife.

Annie deserved better than that. Micah promised himself to protect her from Wyatt's cruel words in the future.

He had been taken aback the first few times Wyatt had spoken that way, but he couldn't let himself keep being surprised by his brother's vitriol.

It reminded Micah of the same rage Wyatt had shown when Micah had arrived there with Jack. It had taken almost a year to settle Wyatt down, and Micah had lived in fear that Jack was going to send him away the entire time.

He had to make sure it was better for Annie.

Wyatt put the horse back into the barn. He should have been doing chores, but he just wasn't in the mood.

Nearly an eighth of his herd was missing and no one had seemed to notice them disappear.

That didn't make any sense. Maybe someone had snuck onto the ranch and stolen the cattle in the middle of the night, but he didn't think anyone would be able to take that many cattle so quietly.

There had to be a reason for it, and the only thing he could think of was the woman that had come to their ranch.

Annie didn't belong there, no matter what Micah kept insisting on.

He didn't know much about Annie's past, just that she came from Boston. Wyatt tried to remember what Micah had told him about her, but he had ignored him most of the time.

Micah had a very positive outlook on life and it was easy to ignore him when he started talking about things that just didn't matter to Wyatt at all.

He stomped into the house and Beatrice looked up at him. "Lunch is almost ready."

"Not hungry." Wyatt scowled as he shook his head.

“You need to eat. I know you’re in a foul mood, but you still have work to do.”

“More work than I thought.” Wyatt hung his jacket up on the hook next to the door.

Beatrice frowned. “Something go wrong?”

“Cattle went missing. No idea where they went.”

“What do you mean?”

“The gate wasn’t opened and the fence is all up.” Wyatt sighed and plopped down on the couch.

“Rustlers?” Beatrice walked out of the kitchen with a steaming bowl of soup in her hand.

Wyatt shrugged. “I don’t know for sure. If they were rustlers, they were awful quiet about it. I can’t believe we didn’t hear it.”

“I’m sure that was it.” Beatrice handed him the bowl and walked back into the kitchen.

“What do you know about that new girl?”

When she came back out, it was with a slice of buttered bread. “Annie?” Beatrice sighed. “Annie is a lovely girl, and she loves this place and she loves Micah.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“You haven’t given her a chance. I’ve talked to her. She’s a nice girl who just wants to do her best.”

Wyatt frowned. “You both just keep protecting her.”

“That’s because you’re acting like a brute, Wyatt. You know better.”

He snorted, and Beatrice gave him a hard look.

“You know that the way you’re acting isn’t right. You don’t have any proof that this woman is a monster, she’s just new here.

“Unless you have some proof, you should probably stop being a jerk to her.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You shouldn’t worry about how I treat her. My family’s business is no business of yours.”

Beatrice looked taken aback and walked out of the room.

Wyatt immediately felt awful about talking to Beatrice that way. Beatrice was one of the nicest women he had ever met.

The housekeeper had acted like a mother to the boys from the time she had come to the ranch and while she was an employee—it wasn’t a normal employee relationship.

Beatrice was a member of his family and he wouldn’t trade her for the world.

Wyatt put his head in his hands. He was letting Annie get to him and it was making him act like a jerk.

His father had raised him better than that. That was what Beatrice would say to him if he hadn’t acted like a monster toward the woman who made sure he got food in his stomach.

Wyatt looked down at his bowl of food on the table. He gave it a hard shove, sending it clattering onto the floor.

That was a bad idea. Wyatt sighed heavily and rose to his feet, grabbing a towel from a bucket next to the kitchen.

Beatrice would have his hide if he made that kind of mess and just left it there. He didn’t want to let her down any more than he already had

by snapping at her.

The cleanup went quickly with Wyatt scooping up the noodles and broth in the rag, moving over to the fireplace to dump the noodles into it.

There was something in the fireplace, though—some paper.

It was an envelope. He frowned, taking a moment to examine the name on the front of it. It was addressed to Annie.

The handwriting on the front looked fancy and educated. He wondered who would be writing Micah's wife and why she would toss it in the trash here instead of her own house.

There had to be something behind this.

Wyatt reached into the ashes and brushed the noodles out of the way. He plucked the papers out and started to read.

The words on the paper caught his attention. He couldn't believe it. It was a letter from Annie's mother, who wanted Annie to come home.

There had to be something he could do with this information. He thought about it for a second but was interrupted as he heard Beatrice coming back out of the kitchen.

Wyatt quickly shoved the letter into his pocket and moved to pick up the bowl he had knocked down.

Beatrice didn't mention the unkind words Wyatt had said to her, but the housekeeper still had a sour look on her face. She didn't say anything, just took the bowl out of his hands.

Wyatt stepped back, shaking his head. He felt nervous about disappointing Beatrice. There was something about the look on her face that made Wyatt nearly shrink into himself.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“That’s my job. Don’t you worry about that.”

“I’m sorry.”

Beatrice hadn’t brought it up, but Wyatt felt the need to say something. He cared what Beatrice thought of him.

“Sorry doesn’t excuse how awful you’ve been acting, Wyatt. Your father would be ashamed of how you’ve been treating everyone here.

“You need to think long and hard about the type of man that you want to be.” She turned and walked right back into the kitchen.

Wyatt was alone once again. He thought about the letter. There was no way Beatrice knew about it.

The woman wouldn’t let Annie get away with hiding something like this from Micah.

He had to save Micah from this awful city woman. His brother deserved so much better than her.

Maybe someday Micah would find a woman here and fall in love, but Wyatt knew that city women weren’t actually capable of love.

His mother had been from the city and she had spent all her time at the saloon before moving on to something newer and exciting.

He didn’t want what happened to his family to happen to Micah.

He didn’t want Micah to have that same sadness behind his smile, the look his father had had every time Wyatt looked at him.

Wyatt had to fix this. Beatrice might think he was a monster for it, but it was the right thing to do.

He had to drive Annie out before she ended up hurting Micah worse after it was all over.

He had never been a good brother to Micah, but he'd tried. Wyatt was never good at showing affection. Kindness wasn't something that came naturally to him.

Micah and Beatrice had come to understand that over the years, though he knew they weren't happy with Wyatt's natural coldness.

They were put off by it, but they seemed to understand that he cared, except when it came to one of the most important things in the world. Micah would trust just about anyone that offered him a smile and Wyatt had to protect that.

He stormed out of the house and made his way toward Micah's house, trying to decide how he was going to reveal the information he had discovered.

Wyatt got to Micah's house and knocked on the door. No answer came. He knocked again; still no answer.

Wyatt had gotten over-excited and walked over to the house when he knew Micah wouldn't actually be there. Micah hadn't taken a break for lunch because Wyatt's younger brother was worried about the missing cattle.

Micah must have still been in the fields. And Annie was off doing whatever it was that she did during the day while Micah and Wyatt did all the work.

He frowned and stomped back off the porch, deciding that he had to get back to work.

He would find a different time to announce to Micah that Wyatt was absolutely right about the woman he had married.

Micah smiled across the table at his wife.

He had decided to sit down for breakfast this morning. The day before had been bad, the missing cattle still hadn't been found, and it worried Micah.

She was beautiful in the morning. Annie hadn't put her hair up yet, but he found it beautiful when the golden locks fell down around her shoulders.

He loved her, and he took note of how lucky he was to have her in his life.

Micah reached across the table to grab a biscuit. "You're getting better at cooking."

"Beatrice is a great teacher," Annie replied.

"You don't give yourself enough credit." Micah felt a grin cross his cheeks.

Annie smiled right back at him as she changed the subject. "So, how are you feeling?"

"A little tired." Micah shrugged, playing it cool. She didn't seem to react very well to compliments. He knew that, but he couldn't help but lay them out whenever she was around.

She was perfect in every way. It was hard to understand what he had done to get so lucky. Annie didn't know much about life at the ranch, but she had still been working hard.

For a woman who had been born into money, it was an odd personality quirk.

He watched her as she buttered her bread. Even the way she did that was amazing, a gentle flick of her wrist. She made the motion idly as she regarded him carefully.

"Did you sleep all right?"

"Still worried about those missing cows." The honesty came easily when he spoke to her.

Her smile started to fade. It made him wish he hadn't said anything about the cows.

She knew about them, he had mentioned it the night before, but bringing it up seemed to bother her.

"Do people really steal cows? I think a cow would be hard to steal." Annie chewed on a biscuit thoughtfully.

Micah wondered what she was picturing. A few images crossed his mind, like a man trying to literally drag off a cow or pick one up over a fence. They all seemed ridiculous.

He snickered. "People can steal cows."

"How?"

"It's like herding cattle." Micah shook his head. "It's fine. I didn't realize people from the city don't know about stealing livestock."

"I didn't know. I had heard about it, but it wasn't exactly explained. I guess everyone just assumed that everyone knew how it worked."

She shrugged. “Maybe I just didn’t pay attention to it.”

“You probably never thought you would have to know.” Micah smiled at her, hoping that her smile would widen.

A pounding sounded on the door and Micah nearly jumped out of his skin because it came as a surprise. He wasn’t expecting company.

It took him a few seconds to realize that it had to be Wyatt coming to get him for something. Maybe his brother had found the cows and needed Micah’s help to get them.

Annie frowned. “Are you expecting someone?”

“It’s probably Wyatt.” Micah got to his feet and walked across the floor to open the door.

Wyatt burst into the room, looking frantic.

There had to be something wrong—Wyatt rarely got that emotional. The man tended to be a little shut off from his own feelings.

“What is it?” Micah asked.

Wyatt stormed over to the table and slammed some papers onto the wood.

Micah tried to peek at them but couldn’t really see what was written on them.

Wyatt looked straight at Micah. “Annie’s leaving.”

“What?” Annie looked taken aback. “I’m not leaving.”

“She’s not leaving.” Micah shook his head.

Wyatt had laughter in his voice. “She’s leaving. Look at this letter.”

Annie's face changed suddenly, and Micah realized she must have known what that letter was.

She didn't stop him from reaching for it, carefully taking it from Wyatt's hand and reading through it.

His eyes traveled quickly from side to side, taking in every single word. He couldn't believe it.

Annie was given the offer to go back home to a life of ease. She had to take it.

He looked up at Wyatt. "Where did you get this?"

"She was hiding it in the fireplace at the main house."

Annie scoffed.

Micah didn't know what to think about what he was reading. This was so strange. He couldn't believe Annie had never mentioned this to him.

Wyatt gloated. "See! I told you she was just going to leave. This had to have been planned. I don't know what she's taking with her, but she plans to leave."

"I'm not taking anything with me," Annie countered. "I don't know what you're thinking, but it's wrong."

"You know what I'm thinking." Wyatt smirked at her. "I think you're some big-city vixen that's come into town just to hurt a small town man."

"I don't know if you're just doing this because it hurts someone or because you have a different awful reason."

Annie stormed off, out of the room, and Micah watched her leave. He couldn't believe what he had read.

Her family had money again. She could just leave him. He didn't think she had an evil intent, but Wyatt had been awful to her.

Micah couldn't blame his wife for wanting to leave and go back to that life.

He looked up at Wyatt, his heart breaking. Wyatt looked smug, but then his face fell. "I'm sorry. I hate that this has happened to you."

"I didn't want to know this." Micah shook his head. "I never wanted to know this." He tossed the letter down.

He was feeling guilty already. He should have stood up for his wife. He should have defended her, but Wyatt had taken him by surprise.

Annie rushed into the room, her skirts whooshing around her legs. The woman was walking with pride and purpose.

She had an envelope in her hands. His eyes locked on the sepia paper.

It took his brain far too long to figure out what the envelope in her hand meant. There was another letter. Micah didn't know what to expect.

But Annie didn't seem to care. She was staring down Wyatt as she opened the envelope and removed the letter, holding it up for him.

Micah gulped.

Annie cried, "I wasn't going. That's the response to that letter, telling her how much I love Micah and that I won't go home.

"I wasn't saying anything because it didn't matter. I don't want to go back there."

Wyatt shrunk into himself.

Micah realized what was really going on. Wyatt had found half the

evidence and had used it to level a dangerous accusation.

Micah reached over to take the letter from Wyatt's hand. There was no resistance to the motion, and Micah looked over the paper.

He frowned, not sure where anything in his life was going to go from there.

Annie didn't say anything else, she just rushed out of the house. "I've got chores to do. You two have fun accusing me of being a terrible person."

Micah's eyes ran over the paper as he took in the words over and over again. Annie had actually turned it down. She didn't want to go back home.

Annie didn't want the life that her mother had offered. Her words were glowing, talking about how happy she was at the ranch and how the work was hard, but rewarding.

She told her mother about learning how to cook and garden and take care of chickens. She even wrote out a list of names that she had given the chickens with a note about how they might be eaten someday, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

Her words spoke of pure joy.

But Wyatt was frowning.

Micah turned to his brother. "I can't believe you would do something like this. It's insane."

"It's not insane. You just can't see it." Wyatt shook his head. "She didn't mean anything in that letter."

"You've lost your damn mind." Micah shook the paper at him. Rage curled up in his chest, settling in for the long haul.

He had to fight himself not to hit his brother for what Wyatt had done.

“Take a look at this. All she does is talk about how much she loves me, and I let you get into my head.”

“What?” Wyatt took the paper from Micah and started to read it.

Micah didn’t let him finish reading. He chased Annie out of the house.

A soft rain was falling, but Micah didn’t even bother grabbing a jacket. Annie had to be somewhere on the ranch. He paused, looking around and trying to put together where Annie might have gone.

He stalked over to the chickens, but she wasn’t there. He made his way to the garden.

Those were Annie’s domain, where most of her chores outside of the house were while Wyatt and Micah took care of the animals. She said she was doing chores.

She had probably gone somewhere to do something useful.

Annie liked to do things when she was upset—even if it didn’t fix her problems, it let her feel like she could do something to fix it. Micah had discussed that with her before.

He didn’t blame her; he wanted to fix things, too. Annie was hurt and he had helped cause that pain by doubting her. He had to make it up to her.

Annie could change her mind now. She could decide to leave him because he believed Wyatt for a short while. She didn’t deserve to be doubted.

Nothing Annie had ever done would seem like she didn’t love him.

Annie was in the garden, angrily yanking weeds from between some growing potatoes. He stopped, trying to figure out what to say, but nothing came to mind.

She turned to him, just staring.

Micah rushed in. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You don't deserve that."

"I know I don't. I have done nothing but try to make everyone feel that I'm not going to leave." Her fists clenched by her side. "But nobody trusts me."

"I let him get to me. I'm sorry. I don't feel that way. I don't think you're going to leave."

"Then why didn't you say anything?" Annie frowned.

Micah reached out to touch her arm. "I don't know. I didn't know how to react. I wasn't expecting it. Why didn't you tell me about the letter?"

"Because I wasn't going. I didn't want you to feel bad about me refusing that life to stay with you. I knew it would make you feel bad that you can't give those things to me."

Micah felt his heart melt. She had just been trying to protect him. She didn't want him to know that she had the offer to leave him and wasn't going to take it.

"You can tell me anything."

"I know. I know I can, I just didn't want it to come up. I can't believe he did that to me." Annie scoffed.

Her offense at the accusations Wyatt had leveled was palpable. She was filled with righteous anger. "I don't know what I'm going to do now."

"Just come inside. It's raining, you'll catch your death of cold." Micah tried to usher her inside with his hands as he said the words.

Annie crossed her arms, refusing to move. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine." Micah knew his wife was stubborn, but he'd never expected this from her.

"What do you care if I'm fine or not?" she spat.

The rage in Annie's voice hit him like a sack of bricks. He felt terrible about having doubted her. She must have been able to read that on his face.

Micah knew that doubting her again was the worst thing that he could do. His brain scrambled for the right words to say. "It's not just that."

"Then what do you want?"

"I just want to tell you that I'm sorry. I should have believed you. I didn't know what to say when he showed me the letter."

"I didn't expect him to go digging in the fireplace to find some dirt on me. It wasn't even dirt. He just chose to read the situation as poorly as possible."

Micah stepped closer to her.

Annie stopped ranting and stared at him.

"Tell me what I have to do to make this right." Micah rubbed her arm.

She shook her head. "I don't need you to do anything. I just want you to understand that I would never leave you."

"I love you more than anything in this world. All the money in the world wouldn't drag me from your side. I just want to be with you."

Micah froze. He knew how she felt, but when she said it like that, it made him want to jump for joy.

He couldn't make himself move, though, just staring wide-eyed at her.

“Well?” Annie asked. “Aren’t you going to say anything?” She put her hands on her hips.

“I’m sorry.” Micah shook his head. “I can’t say anything as pretty as that. I don’t know what I could say that could even show you how I feel.

“I love you, Annie. You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. No matter what you have to deal with, it just makes you stronger.”

“You could say that about yourself, too.”

“It’s not the same.” Micah reached out with his other hand. “You have this beauty surrounding you. It’s strong and fierce and brave. You’re unstoppable.

“Once you put your mind to something, nothing can get in your way. I get so scared that you’re going to realize how much you’re worth and that I can’t give it to you.”

“I want to be with you, Micah.” Her voice softened.

“You want to be with me for now. That’s why I couldn’t respond. You deserve all the nice things in life. You deserve money and parties and servants to make you meals.

“So much more than I would ever be able to give you on the ranch here. But I love you and I never want you to leave.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

“I know. I should have known that all along. I don’t know what I was thinking. I know you would never leave me.

“I wish I could give you everything you deserve, though,” Micah admitted.

Annie stepped up and folded herself into his arms.

Micah pulled her close, feeling the warmth of her body against his chest. It just felt right for her to be there with him.

She deserved to be happy, and if she was happy here, he was a lucky man.

“I’ll never doubt you again.”

She looked up at him and he brought his lips down to meet hers. The kiss took his breath away. Her arms wrapped around his neck.

He was the luckiest man in the world. Annie was perfect in every way. He would never let her go unless she wanted to leave. And she didn’t want to leave him.

His heart thudded in his chest. She truly did love him.

He felt pride start to well up in his chest, wanting to show this wonderful woman off to the world, exclaiming about how much they loved each other.

She was willing to give up every creature comfort to be with him. It was unbelievable.

He would have to deal with Wyatt, but that could be dealt with when Micah managed to pull himself away from his wife.

Right now, her soft lips and the rain falling around her made his life a little more perfect. He never wanted this moment to end.

Annie belonged in his arms and he belonged with her embracing him. It was the only place he could call home now.

The ranch had once been the center of his world, but now it was Annie. He would go anywhere she would—even back east, if that was what she wanted.

It hadn't taken long for Wyatt to read Annie's response to her mother. His heart sank.

Annie wanted to stay with Micah even if she could go back and never have to work again in her life. She could have a better life. But she didn't want that life.

He could hardly believe it. How could anyone turn that down?

Wyatt hadn't expected that sort of response, but it was starting to make sense. His hand fell down by his side, the papers slipping out of his fingers and fluttering to the floor.

It was all a big mistake.

He had thought the worst of Annie because of what his mother had done. He had no reason to have faith in her, except the fact that everyone else in his life seemed to adore this woman.

Beatrice stood up to him about her, telling Wyatt that he was wrong. But he hadn't listened to the wise housekeeper.

Instead, he had doggedly gone after any reason not to trust Micah's wife.

He thought about the other times he had been wrong before. He had been wrong about Micah all those years ago.

Micah was a good man that had worked hard for years on a ranch he would never inherit. Wyatt was Jack's son, but Micah was also Jack's son.

Wyatt thought about his father. His father had faith, no matter what happened.

It was the reason Micah had even come to the ranch. His father had had faith in a boy who had lost everything and he'd taken Wyatt's younger brother in.

Wyatt had been trying to protect Micah, but had gone too far.

He looked down at the paper once again before setting it down onto the table and rushing out the door, leaving the door to slam behind him as he jogged down the front steps to try to find Annie and his brother.

He had to try to make all of this right, somehow.

Wyatt found them in the garden. It was the first place he checked, knowing Annie worked in the garden for hours every day, making sure they had fresh vegetables on the table.

He wanted to walk up to them and say something, but he saw Micah kissing Annie.

They looked so happy and in love. Wyatt felt a pang of jealousy hit him right in the gut. Micah was happy.

Wyatt didn't remember the last time he was that happy to be around another person.

Micah deserved a woman like Annie and Wyatt deserved to be miserable for the rest of his life. The guilt that Wyatt felt would last forever.

He would have to try to find a way to make it up to them when he got

the chance, but he wasn't going to interrupt their loving moment.

Wyatt had already intruded on far too many of those.

He stared at them. The rain kept falling down around him.

It seemed brighter where they were, like the clouds that were over Wyatt didn't exist over Micah and Annie. It might have been a trick of the light, but Wyatt didn't think so.

He was almost certain that his brother had a blessing in his life that allowed him to love as deeply as he did.

They looked painfully happy. Wyatt felt a lump form in his chest and start to move down to his stomach.

He didn't like looking at them when they were that happy—it only reminded him of how miserable he already was.

Wyatt slunk off back to the main house. He had a lot on his mind and wasn't really paying much attention.

That was why he nearly walked into the man that was standing on his porch with a frown on his face.

Wyatt's attention snapped up, recognizing a neighboring rancher. It was George, a rancher from down the road.

"Is something wrong?" Wyatt stepped up onto the porch and tried to act like nothing was wrong as he asked the question.

The rancher nodded. "You could say that."

Wyatt's heart sank. "What is it?"

"I bought some cattle the other day. They had your brand on them." The rancher motioned in the direction of his ranch.

Wyatt paused, glancing toward his own corral. He thought about the missing cattle. If it was true, then someone had managed to sneak in and steal a few heifers.

“My brand? You sure it was mine?”

The other rancher nodded again. “Sure as I could be. I’ve known your brand since your pa started this ranch.” This was an older man, someone about his father’s age.

“I was wondering if you sold several of your cattle recently?”

“No, I didn’t do that.” Wyatt shook his head. “I haven’t had to sell a cow in a year.”

“These weren’t calves.”

“I figured as much.” Wyatt sighed. “I don’t think any cattle got out. A few went missing, though.”

The rancher frowned heavily. “It’s probably rustlers. I heard some rumors about some men stealing cattle last week at the saloon.”

Wyatt rocked back on his heels, hooking his thumbs into his belt loops. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. All thoughts about Micah and Annie fled from his mind.

“How do they do it?”

“I wasn’t told anything specific, I just know they take a few to make sure the cows are good, then they go and steal the whole herd.”

“They must be trying to sell them quickly. Why else would they sell so close to where they took them?”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into their heads, but if I find out more I’ll let you know.”

Wyatt's jaw nearly dropped to the ground. That meant he still had time to save the rest of his herd. "Thank you."

"No problem. We have to look out for each other around here."

Those words hit Wyatt with a sharp pang of guilt. He hadn't really been looking out for his brother. Instead, he had treated the man with distrust and caused so much pain.

Wyatt would be surprised if Annie ever spoke to him again.

Micah carefully saddled his horse. He was so happy with the way that conversation had played out, but he had to get to work now.

Chores on the ranch needed to get done, no matter what drama was playing out between all the people who lived there.

He was going to miss Annie more than he normally did, though. Their kiss lingered on his lips and he felt himself occasionally touching his face to relive the passion through the swollen lips he had earned from their passionate moment.

It felt like he was still kissing her. He assumed it was like gaining his sea legs and then stepping back onto the land.

Everything just felt a little off-kilter without her presence nearby. His heart was with her all the time. He didn't even want her to return it.

Micah glanced up to see Wyatt running in his direction, clearly in a hurry.

Pointedly ignoring him, Micah climbed up onto the saddle. He didn't want anything to do with his brother at the moment. The man had proven to be an absolute nightmare.

Wyatt rushed up, breathing heavily from his run. "Micah!"

Micah turned to him with fire in his eyes. "I don't want to hear a single thing you have to say."

"I don't care about any of that, this is important." Wyatt shook his head.

"You don't care about it? You should care about it. Annie is innocent and you just decided that you hated her. It didn't matter what she did, it was never good enough for you.

"And you were a monster when I arrived, too. I had been hoping you would just get over it in time, but you just kept getting worse and worse.

"Now, I don't want anything to do with you. I'm not even sure I want to stay on the ranch."

That was a bluff. This ranch was his home. Micah never wanted to leave it. He just wanted to say something that would shock and possibly hurt Wyatt.

His brother stopped in his tracks, staring at Micah. The threat had the desired effect after all. "I don't want you to leave the ranch."

"I don't care what you want anymore. It doesn't matter."

Wyatt practically screamed, "I just need to talk to you."

"Why don't you just leave me alone before I have to hit you for coming after my wife again." Micah snorted. "I don't want to deal with you right now."

"It isn't like that. It isn't about anything to do with that. I don't care about anything about that. We have to deal with the cattle."

Wyatt seemed to be in a hurry, looking around frantically. Micah had no idea what might get Wyatt worked up in so short a time if it wasn't for Annie.

"Look, I'm sorry, but there's something else. Give me a chance." Wyatt had his hands out and visible. It almost looked like the man was

surrendering. "This is important."

"As important as that letter?" Micah snapped. "You seemed to think that was pretty important, too."

"I deserved that, but I really need you to just listen." Wyatt looked half-crazed as he pleaded with Micah. "I don't care about Annie anymore. I was just trying to protect you."

"I know what women like her do. My mother was like her, and I want you to have something better than that. You deserve to be happy."

Micah froze, staring at Wyatt wide-eyed. "What?"

"You heard me. And I said it's not important."

"What happened with your mother?" Micah asked. He couldn't get past what had been said during Wyatt's outburst.

This was a conversation Wyatt didn't want to have ever again. "Like I said, it's not important. There are more rustlers coming."

"What?" The horse Micah was riding took a step forward and then shifted back. The animal was restless and snorting.

"Can you get off that horse so I can actually tell you what's going on? Or are you going to keep yelling at me until they come back for the rest of the herd?"

Micah frowned. "What happened?"

"There was a neighbor at the main house. They had bought some of our cattle, the ones we noticed were missing this morning."

Micah couldn't believe what he was hearing. As Wyatt went through the story, he realized how much danger they could all be in if the rustlers decided to get violent.

They had already proven very good at quietly stealing a few cattle, but getting away with every single one on the farm would be noisy. They would probably be ready to defend themselves.

Rustlers were going to come back, and it would probably be soon. It would be up to them to defend the ranch, but he wasn't sure he could trust Wyatt to have his back anymore.

He wondered if Annie could shoot a gun. Micah tried to imagine her with a little pistol as she walked the streets of the city.

The thought would have made him smile if it wasn't for such dire circumstances. He decided to assume she wasn't any good with a gun.

She had never shown or said anything about them, and it made sense that she wasn't really a fighter.

Micah had needed to learn, it was just part of life on the ranch. And clearly, that wasn't going to change any time soon.

"There's only two of us," Wyatt finished. "I have no idea how we're going to stop this."

"There's four of us," Micah corrected.

"Do you really expect Annie to shoot a man if she has to?" Wyatt looked incredulous.

"Annie is strong enough to do whatever she needs to do," Micah insisted. He believed in his wife. She was a good woman who would do whatever was necessary to keep her family safe.

"Look at how hard she's been working around the ranch. The woman never gives up, no matter how hard it is to handle." Micah was beaming with pride, his chest puffed out.

Wyatt shook his head. "I'm not sure you want her to go into a possible fight."

“What do you care about what Annie does or how good she is at anything? Annie would help if we asked her to.

“Hell, even you could ask her if you wanted to. She would probably do it if it was good for the ranch. She loves this place.”

“Can you stop bringing Annie into this? We can talk about that stuff after we stop these rustlers.”

Micah frowned. He was still hurt by everything his brother had done and he was finding any excuse to rub it in Wyatt’s face now.

Maybe that made him a bad person, or maybe it just made him human, wanting to hurt someone who had so badly hurt the woman he loved.

He shifted in the saddle, falling silent for a moment before speaking up. “There has to be a plan.”

“I don’t have one yet. They won’t be here until dark, so maybe we can find a solution together.”

Micah frowned. “I don’t know if I can even work that closely with you anymore. I don’t even want to look at you.”

“Then don’t look at me. Blindfold yourself and give me a chance to pick your brain about how to handle these bandits.”

The mental image Wyatt painted was hilarious. His brother could be funny when he wasn’t being a monster to someone else.

He pictured himself shooting blindly with his eyes covered, trying to aim at the bandits but just ending up shooting wildly.

He looked down at Wyatt. The man looked desperate. He felt a little bad for making Wyatt beg him to help, but Wyatt had been a brute and he deserved to be treated like a brute.

Micah frowned, scratching his head.

“Please. I get that you hate me, but we can’t let that destroy everything Pa built.”

Micah sighed. “Fine. I’ll help.”

Wyatt stepped back, giving Micah his space. There had always been space between them, mostly in their love for each other.

Micah had tried to bridge that gap for years, and now Wyatt needed him and was looking at him like he belonged there. It was a strange feeling, knowing Wyatt actually seemed to want him around, especially when there was trouble.

Wyatt stared at him. “I know I haven’t been a good brother. I know I don’t treat you like I should.”

“You could say that again. I tried to be your family, but I’m not cruel. I wouldn’t leave you to lose your whole livelihood. Regardless of what you think of me.”

He hoped this would make Wyatt rethink his home and family. Micah didn’t know if he would be able to trust Wyatt even if his brother said he had a change of heart.

It had been too long. Wyatt had always kept Micah at arm’s length and he had pushed that even further when Annie had come to the ranch.

The relationship would take some time to mend, but that didn’t mean Micah would leave his brother to lose all the cattle on the ranch.

Micah also wanted to ask more about Wyatt’s mother, but this wasn’t the time or the place to discuss something Wyatt was clearly still so hurt about. The answers would probably come in time.

All Jack had done was imply that the woman was dead and buried

somewhere in the middle of nowhere, a nameless victim of some crime or the weather.

Annie glanced over at Beatrice. Her arms were crossed in front of her stomach, causing her shoulders to hunch over. She had a lot of doubts in her mind.

Beatrice had a deep frown on her face as she examined the state of the pantry.

Annie didn't know what Beatrice was seeing. She didn't have the same experience with the ranch that the older woman had.

But she could read the lines on the housekeeper's face and recognized the concern that creased Bea's forehead.

That made Annie squint back toward the pantry. The shelves looked well-stocked, but she didn't know if it would last them through the winter.

Some strange bugs in the garden had caused many of the plants to be thrown out. And there were cattle missing. That wasn't a good sign.

Annie pursed her lips, trying to decide what to say. She wanted to fix this, but she wasn't sure how she could. She didn't know enough about ranching life.

She sighed heavily. "There has to be something."

Beatrice shook her head. "We'll figure it out, but it won't be easy."

"I'll do whatever I can to help."

"We normally would buy supplies..." Beatrice trailed off.

Annie rocked back on her heels. "We can't afford that, can we?"

"We can't, not with the cows gone."

Annie uncrossed her arms to rub the bridge of her nose. Her blond hair was up neatly, but her bun suddenly felt too tight as she tried to figure out how to handle this particular situation.

"Maybe I can get a job in town to help," she offered.

"I don't know any place that's hiring." Beatrice sighed and then shrugged.

It was like that over and over. They kept coming up with ideas that wouldn't work and the cycle would start all over again.

There didn't seem to be any answers out there for them. Nothing felt right.

Annie knew that life was hard out on a ranch, but she never expected to risk starvation. She glanced around the house, a soft frown crossing her face.

Her head tilted for a moment as a thought started to form. It would take some time, but there was possibly a way that she could help. "Can you make lace, Bea?"

Beatrice frowned. "No? I know how to knit, though."

"Can you turn the wool from the sheep into yarn and then knit with it? Maybe that would help us earn some extra money. And we could find other small items to sell."

"We could make butter, as well. That's worth more than milk alone."

Beatrice nodded.

“This could actually help. It’s more work, but I think we can do this.”
Annie was starting to feel hopeful. Her shoulders straightened.

Beatrice offered her a small smile, then shook her head, walking away from the pantry. “I think we’re all having a bad day. We haven’t seen a single sign of those cattle.”

“What are the chances of actually getting them back, do you think?”
Annie realized that she’d never even thought about what happened after the cattle were stolen before.

She never thought about what it meant for the ranch or if they could get the cows back or whether they could even track the thieves.

All she remembered was from books of the west that she got back east, dime store novels full of pretty words and romanticized heroes. And she knew they tended to ignore the harsh realities of the world.

She shivered as she considered what it all meant. They could actually starve out here because someone had stolen from them.

The thought was terrifying and Annie knew she would have trouble trying to focus on anything other than the stone that had formed in the pit of her stomach.

She walked back out to the front room, trying to decide what she could do with this information. The day had been full of debate and decisions, every moment cloaked in worry since the cattle had been discovered missing.

Beatrice came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands off on a towel. She must have been doing some chore, but Annie didn’t care to try to figure out what.

She had other things on her mind.

Annie made her way to the door, her mind still racing over a thousand ideas to fix the problems that the ranch was facing, but nothing seemed to be the right thing.

Beatrice called out to Annie. "Don't worry too much about it. We always figure it out. Just have to have faith and work hard and we'll make it through somehow."

Annie wasn't sure it was that easy. She had seen the worry on Beatrice's face.

She wasn't a fan of being placated, but she understood exactly what the housekeeper was doing. Beatrice was trying to keep a brave face after a moment of losing her guard.

Annie knew what it was like to be that woman and she was determined to keep fighting for this place. The clapboard house on a dirt road may not have been the future that she imagined for herself as a child, but Micah had made it her home.

And she had helped.

She walked outside of the house, standing on the front porch where she could look out at the pastures and fields around them. It was beautiful, a little piece of heaven, with tall grasses already starting to turn brown as they swayed in the wind.

Beatrice followed her outside.

"It can be fixed right?" Annie asked cautiously.

"If we work hard enough, we can beat anything. The boys may have to go hunting and maybe we can forage for wild acorns and onions. That should help."

Annie bit her lip and nodded. "Along with the selling stuff?"

"That's the plan."

It was a rehashing of the same conversation. Annie knew it was going to keep happening over and over until they felt comfortable with their survival.

There would be hope or they would make hope. Beatrice was just as committed as Annie was. And she knew Micah would fight hard, too.

Micah stared at the ceiling. He was trying to figure out what to say to Annie. She had been troubled by the missing cattle and the struggles they may face over winter.

He wished he could make all her worries go away, but he knew that would take a lot of work and a little luck.

He rolled to look at her. She was staring up at the ceiling. He wondered if she had the same things on her mind that he did.

Her golden hair splayed out over the pillow. Micah couldn't see her eyes, but he remembered the soft brown color that danced when she was happy.

Annie had expressive eyes. It was one of her most beautiful features.

Micah softly cleared his throat. He wanted to talk to her and make it all better.

He just wanted Annie to be happy again, like she was when she had first arrived.

Times had been a little difficult lately, but they had made it through difficult times before. They would make it through this time.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked her quietly.

"About what?"

“About whatever is on your mind.” Micah wasn’t sure how to get her to talk to him, but he had to try.

“It’s nothing, not really. I can’t help but worry about the cattle.” Annie bit her lip. If she hadn’t been doing it because she was upset, he would have found it attractive.

It caused a few complex emotions to fill him. Micah wasn’t always good with figuring out how to respond to these emotions.

It had perhaps led to more than a few issues getting to know both Wyatt and his new wife. It may have been the source of his problems.

He looked at her shimmering hair, trying to decide the right thing to say to her. Nothing came to mind, nothing that would help anyway.

He ended up having to stick with the same old platitudes that he had said over and over to her, hoping they would make her feel better. “We’ll handle that, I promise.”

Her face showed that his comfort didn’t help her feel better at all. She still had questions and worries. “What if they do come back?”

Micah thought about it but wasn’t sure what to say. He was a little worried about the rustlers coming back.

They couldn’t afford to lose more of the cattle, but he didn’t want to scare her more. This must have been brand new to her, but he knew how to handle situations like this.

He reached out and put his hand on her arm. Honesty may be a solution, even if he romanticized the situation a bit.

She needed to keep hope, and he had to find a way to provide that.

“I promise. Rustlers are all over the place out here,” he explained.

“These guys are quieter than other groups and actually managed to

get a few, but getting all of them is going to be much harder.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” He smiled. “Other than that, how have you been?”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ve been doing fine. I love it here on the ranch, you know that?”

“I know you do.”

“These past few days have been pretty bad.” She sighed, running her hands through her hair. “But before that, it was amazing. Except for Wyatt.”

Micah winced. “I was so afraid you would leave after the way he treated you. It wasn’t right.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but you don’t deserve to be treated like a villain just for loving me.”

She turned to face Micah. Her beautiful brown eyes had bags underneath them. She looked exhausted. He had the urge to pull her into a deep hug, but stopped himself.

A shared moment passed between them. Micah was certain that he started to understand his wife better at that moment.

There was nothing that really needed to be said. They had said it all, hashed everything out, but there were still feelings there.

Feelings like that took some time to get over.

He rubbed her arm and she snuggled against him. He kissed her hair, embracing her and pulling her tight against his chest. He would protect her from anything that came to pass.

It didn't matter what it was, he was going to do everything in his power to take care of her. She deserved only the best in life.

Her breath started to become more shallow. He smiled softly, knowing that he had made her feel safe enough to fall asleep in his arms.

Micah felt like he had done something right, even if it was just this one thing. And that meant the world to him.

She was his everything. He wanted to keep her happy, but it was hard to focus on the tender moment.

Annie tensed. She must have heard the cattle lowing, as well. Cattle were usually pretty quiet after dark unless something was disturbing them.

It could have been a wild animal—a bear, perhaps—but he didn't think it was. Under the sounds of the cattle, he swore that he could hear the hooves of horses.

He hoped it was just his imagination, but they had already been told to expect the bandits to return.

Micah leaned forward, kissing her cheek. He didn't stay for long before he pulled away and climbed out of the bed. "I have to go and handle this."

She started to get up as well. "I'll go with you."

He frowned. "You should stay here where it's safe."

"This is my home, too," she insisted. "I can help you."

"Let me get you a gun."

She bit her lip, but he didn't have time to ask any questions about the look on her face. He would have to deal with her insecurities later.

He pulled on his boots and she reached for her own shoes.

“I’ll meet you out there,” she promised.

He hoped she would break that promise as he rushed out of the house. She didn’t need to be a part of any fight.

It was his job to protect her, and he would give his life for that. But he just couldn’t even imagine living without her now that she was there in his world.

His heart raced as he rushed toward the paddock. It felt like it was going to take forever to get to the cattle.

Annie heaved for breath as she caught up to Micah. Wyatt was running up to them from the other side.

Nobody said much; it would have just slowed them down anyway to start having a conversation.

She was still in her nightgown and all three of them were kicking up loose dust. It got in her face, but she managed to shield her eyes.

She rushed alongside the boys. Micah's blue eyes were drawn and worried. Wyatt had a stern expression. They were ready to fight for their livelihood.

The ranch was dark and it was difficult to see the rustlers, but they could definitely see what direction they were in.

There must have been three or four men on horses, guiding the cattle out of the ranch. She couldn't tell any details about them, but from the way they moved, they were probably accomplished riders.

That would make them harder to catch. She considered rushing to the barn and grabbing some horses, but that would take a while.

She did the mental arithmetic to decide if she had time. She wasn't good around the horses yet and it was the middle of the night. Her presence would likely spook them.

Annie called out to Micah. "Horses?"

Micah didn't seem to understand what her breathless question actually meant. He turned back toward her. "They've got horses. Keep moving, they're getting away."

Wyatt snapped at them. "This isn't a time for a conversation. If she's blind, she needs to get out of the way."

"That's not what I was saying." Annie let the exasperation out in her voice.

"Then get to what you're getting at." Wyatt was in a foul mood, but in this instance it was understandable. Annie tried not to let it get to her.

"Do you want me to get the horses?" She breathlessly fought to get it out. Running and talking was hard.

It made everything sound angrier than it should have been. She was surprised by just how rage-filled her voice was as she shouted into the darkness at the men.

She couldn't tell which man running in front of her was Micah and which one was Wyatt, but it didn't matter. They were both going the same direction and even if she couldn't see them well, she knew Micah's voice.

If they split up, she decided she would follow Micah. Micah would make sure she was safe.

The rustlers were here. She could hear them shouting and yelling for the cattle to get moving. There wouldn't be much time to stop them.

For the first time, Wyatt's frown didn't seem to be directed at Annie. He had actually acknowledged her with a simple nod as they met up.

She would have been taken aback, but there were more important things to deal with.

Small steps, though. Those mattered.

They approached the cattle, but the rustlers already had them out of the fence. The thieves were on horseback, so they would have little luck keeping up with them.

She started to panic, but the boys kept running so she kept following them.

The horses and cattle moved faster, though.

Wyatt started to shout and wave his arms, trying to get the cattle to run away from the rustlers. It didn't work. The herd kept on the road out of the ranch.

Annie thought about firing her gun up into the air, but she wasn't sure she would be able to handle that. She had never actually fired a gun before.

This was the first time that she had even been within five feet of a weapon.

It was a little intimidating, but she hadn't said anything to Micah. That would have just made her look more inept.

She didn't know what to do, other than follow the boys. It wasn't clear what they were going to do, not yet.

Annie gasped and stopped, watching as Micah and Wyatt split off from each other, trying to frighten the cattle so they ran from the rustlers. It didn't work.

Wyatt pulled his gun out and took aim at one of the riders. The shot missed. He started to run once again, hoping to catch up to the moving cattle.

Annie followed quickly, pulling the skirts of her nightdress up so she didn't trip over it, but she couldn't keep up with men on horses.

Her heart sank as the last of the cattle crested a hill. There was no

way they could catch up to the rustlers now.

She slowed down to a stop, feeling tears starting to form in the corners of her eyes. But she didn't want to show weakness.

This wasn't a moment that should end with Micah comforting her. There were other things that they needed to do.

Wyatt and Micah gave up a few moments later and Annie moved to meet them.

She could hear Wyatt yelling at Micah as she approached. It made her stop dead in her tracks.

Wyatt was screaming at Micah, "They got away."

"I know." Micah had a deep frown. Annie's husband wasn't shouting or screaming or anything of the sort, but the frustration was evident in his voice. "Look, we can handle this."

"We can't just handle this. This is everything. We've lost everything." Wyatt threw up his hands. "You need to start taking problems seriously."

"I do take problems seriously." Micah's voice had gotten louder.

"Then take this one seriously. It's not a joke. We're going to lose the ranch."

"We're not going to lose the ranch. We always make it work."

"We've got an extra mouth to feed because you couldn't even accept the fact that the ranch isn't strong enough to handle a wife. Heaven forbid you actually have children with her."

Annie stopped in her tracks and slunk back towards the fence. This conversation was like a punch right in her gut.

Wyatt had nodded at her, but as soon as it all went south, he turned on her again.

This was something that seemed to happen over and over again. Wyatt would just decide that everything was all her fault.

She sighed. The argument was continuing.

Micah growled in response to an attack from Wyatt that Annie didn't quite hear. He was starting to get louder and more animated.

"You hating her doesn't mean that anything is her fault. She's a good woman who works hard for the ranch, and she'll keep doing that."

"Don't you think it's an awful big coincidence that she shows up and within a couple months we lose everything?"

"We haven't lost everything. We can still make this work, Wyatt. We'll be fine."

"I'm telling you, she'll be gone tomorrow. Off to meet with the thieves she works with."

"That's too far, Wyatt." Micah stomped toward his brother. "You can't just say things like that. It's just not right."

"I don't care if you think it's right. I think you need to pay attention to what's actually going on around you."

"If for some reason she does stick around, it only gives us another mouth to feed when she already ruined a good portion of our crops for winter."

"She was learning, Wyatt."

"That's what you keep saying. She can't tell a grown potato from a tiny potato." Wyatt snorted.

"I almost had faith in her, then this happened. What took you so long to get out here?"

Micah scoffed. "What took *you* so long?"

"I was sleeping," Wyatt retorted. "Just because you've been up all night with that woman doesn't mean the rest of us have lost all sense of responsibility, Micah."

Wyatt spat his brother's name out like it was poison.

Annie was afraid that they were going to get in a fistfight. She was even more worried that she was rooting for Wyatt to get hit.

She had to remember that she was a better person than that.

Micah groaned. "You need to keep your trap shut. It's none of your business."

"It is my business. This whole place is my business. It's up to me to keep it alive. And you just keep bringing more trouble."

"I didn't bring the rustlers, Wyatt," Micah cried, his voice rising once again.

"I'm not so sure about that." The accusation hung in the air.

The way he spoke caused Annie physical pain. She started to sob, letting the tears fall down her cheeks before she decided that she couldn't hear any more of this argument.

The brothers were having a bad day. She tried to keep the stress of losing their livelihood in mind, but she couldn't take it anymore. She rushed back toward the house.

Micah hadn't noticed her, so she was able to have some space to herself, hiding out in the room by herself and flopping down on her bed.

Every time life was starting to look up, it turned right back around her again. Maybe it was her fault. She seemed to have the worst luck.

Two families had lost their livelihoods when she was around. That couldn't just be a coincidence, could it?

She didn't know the answer, but she knew how it felt. And it felt wrong.

She didn't want to cry. She tried to fight the weakness. Crying wouldn't solve anything, wouldn't get her anywhere.

She had already spent far too long crying over Wyatt—she didn't need to start sobbing over the cattle on the ranch, as well.

Annie knew she was stronger than that, but the tears still came, falling down her cheeks. The racking, heaving hiccups still escaped her chest and made her entire body shake.

Life was terrible and she was being blamed for it.

She hadn't stolen those cattle, but she was certain that no matter what proof she could offer—if she could even find any—Wyatt would still blame her.

He would always blame her. Micah had tried to make her feel better about it, but his words didn't work.

She just wanted things to get easier. Life was hard—it had always been hard, just in different ways, but recently her life had gotten a lot harder.

It wasn't the ranch's fault. It had started with her family falling from grace, but the ranch was supposed to be her escape from that life.

But now, the ranch had lost everything. She wanted to fix it, but what could a woman like her could actually do to solve the problem?

Annie didn't know how long she'd been sitting there alone. Time had kind of faded off into oblivion, but eventually Micah made his way into the house.

He looked at her. "It's not that bad."

"Wyatt doesn't think that." She didn't mean to snap at the man she married, but she had.

Micah looked down at his feet.

She frowned. Making Micah feel bad was never her intention. Shame filled her chest and it just made her cry harder.

Annie didn't want to do this to him. She reached out and took his hand.

She desperately wanted to make it all better for him, but she didn't have the energy to do that after everything that had happened that night. She just wanted to give up.

Nothing ever seemed right and it felt like Annie was just piling on mistake after mistake.

"I'm sorry."

"You heard what he said, didn't you?" Micah tilted his head. "About the cattle thieves?"

"I heard that he thinks I was working for them. And he's sure I'll be gone soon."

"Do you want to go?" Micah didn't step any closer to her.

Annie realized Micah was probably worried she was going to leave. She couldn't believe he would actually think like that, but it did make sense—it had been stressful since she had arrived at the ranch.

“No, I don’t want to go,” she assured him, softening her tone.

Micah breathed a sigh of relief and moved over to sit next to her. “Thank goodness. I thought I was going to lose you.”

Annie bit her lip. “I would be lying if I said I hadn’t considered it a time or two, but I don’t want to leave you.”

A gentle smile formed on Micah’s lips. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

“How could you smile at a time like this?”

“I may have lost everything else, but I haven’t lost you. Not even after everything. I haven’t lost you.” He said it more than once, as if it hadn’t quite sunk in yet.

She found her own frown starting to fade. Just seeing Micah show any sort of happiness seemed to pull her out of the deep sadness that had been forming inside of her.

Maybe it was something about his beautiful eyes. Maybe it was his unwavering kindness and optimism.

She didn’t know, but something about him just made her entire life better.

They may have a hard time and suffer, but they were definitely going to make it through the trials ahead of them. Micah would become stronger from it, and she would, too.

She regarded her husband carefully. He had built this house with his own two hands, making the roof sturdy.

It wasn’t a fancy house or a mansion, but it was something he had made for her.

Annie knew he had started it before she’d started to write to Micah,

but he had been working on it during their entire correspondence.

He had put her desires into it, making sure they had a comfortable room and a large bed. He'd also made sure they had plenty of space for a family.

He had even put in the effort to give her the big porch where she had spent so many nights since she had come. The porch was the perfect place to sit with a cup of tea as the sunset or a cup of coffee with the sunrise.

Micah couldn't always join her. He had worked so hard to keep this place working that sometimes he didn't make it back to dinner or had to leave before breakfast.

To her, that just showed his dedication. Micah was a loyal man, it was one of the things that she loved about him.

She pulled him close, and he wrapped his warm arms around her. His embrace was warm and comforting. It helped ease her mind. "It's going to be fine. We'll figure it out."

"I know. You always figure something out."

"But if you come up with any ideas, please let me know."

She laughed, but thought about it. The solution shouldn't just be on Micah. She had a brain and an education. She could at least try to help.

Her mind started to race. "I take it that means you don't have any ideas?"

"I don't have any ideas yet, but I know I'll figure out the right way to handle all of this."

"I've got some ideas to make some money, and maybe we can find this gang."

“Nobody knows where they are.” Micah shook his head. “I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

“There has to be someone who knows where they are.”

Micah frowned. “Things don’t work like that in this part of the country.”

“What do you mean?”

“The law doesn’t really exist here. This is a wild world and there aren’t sheriffs for every town. Even if a county does have a sheriff, it doesn’t mean he’s going to be anywhere close.”

Annie bit her lip. An idea was starting to form in her mind. It wasn’t fully developed yet, she had to figure out what assets she had at her disposal to make it all work.

“Don’t people help each other out here?” she asked.

“They do, but not when it’s something that’s going to put their families in danger. Gangs are dangerous,” Micah explained.

“I’m used to there being police close by. It’s a little scary to know that we have to take care of ourselves.”

“We’ll get a message to them, but by the time anyone can come and help, the cattle will probably be sold.”

“Is there a chance we can find them ourselves?” It was vital to know if it was even worth putting the plan together. She was a little worried that the risk was far too much.

“We have to find the right person with the right information, and we have to get them to talk.”

Annie bit her lip. “I think I have an idea about that.”

“What do you mean?”

Annie sighed and started to explain her plan.

Micah didn't look like he believed it would work. “We can always try,” he said.

“You don't believe it'll work.”

“Do you have anything worth anything?”

Annie nodded. “I brought a few things that I managed to avoid selling. They have to be worth something out here.”

“People don't have the money for fancy things here, Annie.” Micah shook his head. “They won't want things they can't use.”

“I know that. I'll figure something out, I promise.” She stood up, pulling herself away from Micah, and he stood to follow her.

Annie didn't push him away as she made her way to the small chest Micah had made for her. It had a small heart carved out of the lid, right in the place where there would normally be a handle.

She loved this piece. He had made it just for her. She was reminded of the hope chest she had before her parents lost everything.

Annie ran her hands over the smooth wood. She knew exactly what she was going to try to trade for the ranch's survival.

It would be painful to give up because she had carefully guarded it when so many of their possessions were getting sold to pay off debts.

“You don't have to do this.”

“I know that I don't, but we need to get those cows back.”

“I know we need to find a way through this, but the cattle can be

replaced. It's just going to take some time."

"It's going to be a hard winter if we don't figure something out."

"We'll make it. We have plenty of wood, we'll stay warm. And we can hunt or forage. We won't be comfortable, but we won't starve."

She sighed heavily. "Just let me try to help, please. We need those cattle back and this might help us do it."

"I'm not sure this is going to work. What if you don't get anything for it? We might do better trading for food."

"I know." She pursed her lips. He was probably right. That would be the smarter option, but that would only be a temporary fix.

They would still have to find the money to buy more cattle and get themselves settled again. That would take a lot of time.

If this plan worked, it could fix everything and only cost them some time and energy.

She had hope they would get the cattle back.

Micah frowned. "You shouldn't have to give up the few things you have for this."

"Everyone needs to sacrifice to make it all work." She shrugged. "I don't mind. This is my home now. I'm not going anywhere, and if I can fix all of this, I'm going to do it."

Micah didn't argue with her plan anymore. She hoped he realized exactly what she would give for this home.

This was the place where she belonged, and she had to fight for it.

Wyatt frowned heavily. He didn't like this plan, but somehow he had let Micah talk him into going along with it.

Annie had to have come up with it. She was trying to help, but he wasn't sure he believed in her plan.

He was scowling as he walked alongside Micah. Annie was in the lead. She wasn't even acknowledging his existence.

He liked it better that way. Maybe she was just going to leave. He could only hope that he had finally managed to get her to go back east where she actually belonged.

Wyatt didn't honestly believe she was the cause of all their problems, but it was easy to say things like that when it felt like his entire life was falling down around him.

He knew it only angered Micah and that he was driving his brother away, but in the heat of the moment, he said things he couldn't ever seem to find the right way to take back.

He tried to be a good man, but it was hard some days.

Jack had taught him better than that. He knew it was wrong, but he didn't have hope. Hope had never served him well in the past.

Micah was looking at Wyatt, and it made Wyatt feel a little nervous. Micah was probably going to say something and Wyatt would have to

find the right way to respond.

Nothing he said ever came out right and he found himself yelling more often than he ever planned to.

Micah opened his mouth and a sense of dread filled Wyatt's gut.

Then, Micah turned to Annie and spoke to her instead. "I'm not sure where we would start."

"I was thinking of heading to the general store or the saloon first." Annie nodded. "There has to be someone that knows where the gang is. And those sound like the most likely spots."

"I hope they give you the information that you're looking for." Micah didn't look so sure about the plan either.

Wyatt tried to keep his mouth shut, focusing on the dusty road into town. They were walking into town this time, deciding to leave the horses at home to save the effort.

Wyatt figured it was probably because if they got what they were after, he would want to act. Leaving him without a horse would make Wyatt think twice about flying off the handle.

He tuned out the conversation Micah and Annie were having. He didn't care to hear them discuss the details. It wasn't going to work, anyway.

Instead, his eyes were drawn to the outskirts of the small town. The shop fronts were painted, but the back of the buildings looked a little rundown.

They had suffered through years of rough weather and not enough money to fix the buildings. Most of the roofs leaked.

This town used to be a lot more vibrant, back when Wyatt was a child, but things had changed over the years.

The town had lost a lot of traffic and everyone had lost money. Many ranches were losing stock to various bandits and gangs in the area.

Even the weather seemed to be harder to handle every year.

This entire place was starting to feel desolate and cursed. He knew there was no such thing as curses, but some years it would be so easy to believe in them.

This was one of those years.

He had just lost his father, and now they were at risk of losing the ranch. If they couldn't figure out a way to eat, they would have to abandon the land and move to a town in order to find work. It would be miserable.

Wyatt couldn't keep his mind away from the worst possibilities. There were so many ways that Annie's plan could go terribly wrong. He was certain that Micah saw it, too.

But Micah was too much of a fool to stand up to his wife. Or maybe he just concentrated on that unfailing optimism he seemed to have in abundance.

All it would take was one person they questioned telling the gang about them. And then the gang would come back to the ranch and cause more problems for his family.

It was on Wyatt to protect everyone. He wanted to stop Annie from her insane plan, but she would never listen to him.

Annie had every reason to believe he was being unreasonable, since he had acted like a brute.

Wyatt frowned heavily as they walked into the saloon. Annie got right to work asking around about the gang, but no one seemed very willing to talk to her.

This wasn't going to go anywhere. He knew it.

Annie looked exasperated as she came away empty-handed once again.

Wyatt knew it would never work, no matter how pretty the necklace in her hands was or how nicely the perfume she had squirreled away smelled.

Micah had told him that she had managed to secret these few items away when her family had lost their fortune. But those things wouldn't matter to anyone.

Annie walked out of the saloon looking disheartened, but she didn't keep her head bowed for long. She strode across the street to the general store.

Wyatt frowned as he watched her regain her confidence after a broken moment. She had recovered from the heartache faster than anyone he had ever seen.

Annie was unbreakable. Wyatt had never seen another woman like that. He almost wished that he had found her before Micah.

Not that he would have given her a chance. He didn't want to get married until he was absolutely sure about the woman and his ability to support her.

Micah had gotten a good woman, but Wyatt didn't think of her as a possible lover—rather as a member of the family that would do anything to protect the ranch.

She didn't own much of value, but she was going to give it up on the rare chance they could recover from the crime that had been committed against them.

She approached a young man outside the front of the general store. "Excuse me?"

He turned to her. Wyatt didn't trust this man already. Something told him that this kid was up to no good—barely old enough to shave, but carrying himself like a big-city gangster.

It was so out of place in a country town like this. But that didn't make this interaction any less risky.

Annie glanced around, then looked back at the boy. "I was wondering if you knew anything about the gang that's stealing cattle in the area."

The kid narrowed his eyes at Annie. "I don't have to talk to you, woman."

Wyatt had the urge to slap this boy. He had been awful to Annie, but it didn't feel right for anyone else to treat her with that kind of disrespect.

He was taken aback by the feeling. He shouldn't feel protective about a woman he was trying to drive out of his home.

She was doing something good for him now, but he didn't know how long that goodwill would last. She likely hated him.

As he watched her interact with the boy, he couldn't help but notice just how earnest and eager to help she was. She wanted to protect his land as much as he did.

It made him feel absolutely terrible for how badly he treated her. Wyatt must have been wrong about Annie.

She continued talking to the boy. "We won't tell anyone that you told us anything."

The boy shook his head. "It's not worth it."

She sighed and pulled out the necklace. "It's real gold."

The boy eyed the delicate chain and gold charm. It really was a

beautiful piece. Finally, he nodded, and Annie handed the item over.

The boy took it and ran off.

Annie looked like she was about to burst into tears, until an older woman stepped out in front of the boy. “Lyle, what do you think you’re doing?”

The boy stopped in his tracks and kicked the dirt under his feet. “Nothing.”

“Did you just steal from that woman?”

“No!” the kid shouted.

Wyatt laughed. This woman had to be related to the boy, probably his mother.

The woman scowled at the young man. “You give it back to her.”

The boy turned around and marched back to Annie, handing back her necklace. “I was going to give it to you, Ma.”

Wyatt snorted in laughter.

Annie smiled. “It’s all right, I don’t mind if he keeps it as long as he actually holds up his end of our bargain. I need him to tell us what he knows.”

The woman winced. “About what?”

Annie sighed. “We’re looking for that gang of cattle rustlers. They stole everything from us and we just want a chance to get it back.”

The woman frowned. “They stole almost a hundred head from us. We’re just barely getting back on our feet.”

“You don’t happen to know where they are, do you?”

The woman nodded. "I do, but I'm not sure it's a good idea to share that information."

"Why not?"

"They might come after us. We already lost the ranch and my husband got a job with the post office. We're barely hanging on."

"I know, but maybe we can put a stop to them forever." Annie stood a little straighter.

Wyatt held his breath. Everything counted on Annie being able to talk this woman out of the information in her head.

"There aren't many of them, but it was too many for my husband to risk standing up to." The woman sighed and then gave directions to a small cabin out in the backcountry.

Wyatt knew the exact area she was talking about. He had thought the property was forgotten about. But he also knew scavengers moved into abandoned homes of others.

Annie handed the woman her necklace. "Take this, please. I can't thank you enough for all the help."

"You don't have to do that. I know you all are going to have a hard time, and you'll need that to pay for funerals if you decide to go after a bunch of gangsters."

Wyatt felt a shiver run up his spine as Annie convinced the woman to take the payment for the information, then came back to talk to Wyatt and Micah.

Wyatt frowned at her. "You should have kept the necklace."

"She's lost more than we have so far. It's going to a good cause."

Micah spoke up. "That's not important. Do we think we can get the

cattle back?”

“I’m sure we can.” Wyatt nodded. “Thanks to Annie finding out where they are.”

“I just hope we got the truth out of her.”

“I’m sure we did.” Micah shifted his weight from side to side.

Both Annie and Micah were watching Wyatt, but Wyatt didn’t feel like losing his cool. Annie had done a wonderful job and had made the right move.

He sighed. “You did a good job, Annie.”

“Thank you.” Annie looked proud of herself.

Micah started to lead them away, but Wyatt frowned. He wasn’t sure what to say when he wasn’t yelling at the woman and telling her to leave.

It didn’t seem like Micah or Annie wanted to continue the conversation, either. But there was more that needed to be said.

Annie led the way back to the ranch, not even looking at him.

She had given so much for this place and he had treated her terribly. He had to say something to her, to try to make things right between them.

Every time a test had come to pass, she had shown up and been willing to help in every way she could. He sighed and held a hand up.

She didn’t notice it because her back was turned to him, so he cleared his throat instead. Micah turned toward him, but Annie didn’t.

“I’m sorry.” Wyatt choked the words out, a tickle still in his throat from the first time he cleared it.

“What?” Micah tilted his head.

Annie turned around to face them. “I didn’t catch that.”

Wyatt sighed. “I said I’m sorry. You’re becoming a real ranch girl.

“I know we don’t like each other, and I don’t expect us to ever like each other, but you’ve given up a lot for the ranch. I’m a big enough man to admit that.”

Annie nodded, and nobody said anything for a while.

Eventually, they all turned around and started walking back toward the ranch. Wyatt had just made the tension worse and he didn’t know what to say from here.

Maybe it was better to just stay quiet.

Micah woke up before dawn. He hoped to slip out of bed before Annie noticed he was gone. He didn't want her to worry.

If he was gone before she woke up, she would probably just assume he was out working, trying to make sure they had enough food to make it through the winter.

He had discussed the plan with Wyatt the night before, when Annie was helping Beatrice cook a cabbage soup and some bread.

They had decided to go gather up what neighbors they could and get the cattle back. Micah just had to get out of the house before Annie woke up and could start asking questions.

She started to stir, and Micah's heart raced. He rushed as he pulled on one of his boots and fell over, slamming his hand into the dresser when he caught himself.

Annie nearly jumped out of bed, ready to fight. Her light hair was a mess and her hands were balled into fists. Her brown eyes darted from side to side.

Micah laughed. "Sorry, I was just heading to work." He hoped that would be enough to cover the mistake of waking her up.

She blinked. "It's awful early, even for you."

"Gotta get a good start on things, considering."

“Oh.” Annie looked disappointed.

“What’s wrong?” Micah didn’t expect that reaction.

“Oh, I was just expecting that we would head out to get the cattle back today.”

“We?”

“Yes, we. What’s the problem with me going along?”

“I think you should stay here when we do that.” His heart pounded in his chest.

She squinted at him, carefully examining his face. “You *are* going to do that today, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to, I can read it all over your face.”

Annie had a discerning eye. Micah wasn’t able to get away with anything, no matter how hard he tried.

This woman was amazing, but sometimes that amazingness got in the way of him trying to keep her safe.

He glanced down at his feet, trying to decide his next course of action. “I don’t think you should go.”

“Is that why you were trying to sneak out of here?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt. We’re probably going to be shooting, it’s no place for a woman.”

She pursed her lips, and Micah knew he had messed up. He started to stammer some kind of response, but he couldn’t find any words.

She let him squirm for a while before she voiced her objection. “Do you think I couldn’t handle it?”

“How good a shot are you?”

“Good enough.”

Micah recognized how vague her answer was. She probably didn’t use a gun often back east where it wasn’t as necessary to life. But she at least knew how to use one.

Still, he didn’t want her there. He would be worried about her the entire time.

If something happened to Annie, it would be devastating. Even Wyatt was starting to respect her. It would be a shame to lose her now.

She wasn’t just another mouth to feed for him. She was his partner in life.

“I wish you would stay here,” Micah said again.

“I know you want me to stay here, but this is my home, too. I want to protect it.”

“What about Beatrice?”

“I’m not going to make Beatrice come along.”

“That’s not what I was saying.” Micah exhaled in frustration.

Annie threw her hands up. This was a full-blown fight now. He knew he was right, but she had some good points.

“Then what were you saying?”

“I think you should stay with Beatrice in case something goes wrong here.”

“What do you think is going to go wrong here?”

“I don’t know, that’s the thing. We just don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“The bandits aren’t going to come back. They already took everything they want from us. This sounds like an excuse to keep me out of the way.”

Micah groaned. “It’s not about keeping you out of the way. I want to keep you safe. You’re my wife. It’s my job to protect and take care of you.

“This is going to be dangerous and you should stay here,” he insisted.

“I can handle danger. I’m coming along. Let me get dressed.”

Like that, the conversation was over. Annie started to dress and was actually ready before Micah had finished brewing a pot of coffee for the pair.

Normally, she put a little more care into her appearance, but today she was nothing but business. Her hair was pulled back simply and she had a sturdy dress on.

She was still beautiful—in fact, in some ways, he found her even more beautiful when she didn’t take all the time to put herself together.

They were out the door in minutes to meet up with Wyatt, who already had the horses saddled. A few ranchers rode onto the ranch while Annie got her own horse ready, and soon they had quite the group.

There were plenty of people angry at this gang and ready to help.

Micah cocked an eyebrow at his brother. “How many people did you convince to help?”

“Five or six ranches sent some people out.”

“That’s a lot of men.”

“What’s Annie doing here?” Wyatt asked.

“She insists on coming along.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“No, but she’s a free woman. I can’t stop her from coming if she wants to.”

Wyatt frowned and crossed his arms. “She could get hurt.”

Micah took a step back in surprise. “Do you actually care?”

“I’m allowed to care about things, Micah. I’m not always a monster.”

“No, most of the time you don’t say anything at all.” Micah shook his head.

“You should already know how I feel about things.”

“That’s the problem, no one ever really knows what you feel about anything,” Micah pointed out. “You just snap at everyone if you have anything to say.”

Wyatt sighed. “If you want to let her come along, I won’t stop you, but please don’t leave if something happens to her.”

“Why would I leave?”

“Because you blame me.”

Micah felt overwhelming sadness, recognizing his brother’s fear. “You’re still my brother, Wyatt, no matter what’s happened between us.”

Wyatt nodded.

Micah helped coordinate and count all the people they brought to face the gang. It was a good group.

From the information Annie had gotten, the gang wasn't that big, six men at most. They had ten ranchers and Annie heading out there.

Micah was hopeful they might be able to handle this quickly and easily, but they didn't know anything for sure, only what people had heard about the gang.

And there was no way to know how well armed they were.

As they rode along, the entire group was tense and silent, trying to decide what to do.

Annie was chewing on her lip, and Micah found himself staring at her. He just couldn't help it.

He didn't think that she should have come along, but he certainly was glad she was close to him when he was thinking about all the worst conclusions to this raid.

These men were ranchers, they weren't bandits. They wouldn't be able to sneak the cattle out unless they got extremely lucky, but maybe, just maybe, they could avoid a fight due to their numbers and the bandits would just surrender and give up.

When they arrived at the cabin, they could hear the cattle. The sun would be coming up soon and the animals were already starting to wake.

Micah slipped off his horse and walked up to the cabin.

There was one bandit guarding the herd.

After Micah came back and reported his findings, all of the ranchers

moved in. As soon as they came into sight, the guard started to yell, alerting everyone in the house.

Guns came out of holsters and Annie was backing away from the crowd.

Micah shouted over the noise of the horses and cattle. “Annie, go hide behind a tree. This will be just fine.”

Annie nodded in agreement and slipped off her horse, leading it a bit away from the soon to be battle ground and securing it to a tree. Annie would have cover there.

Micah nodded in agreement and breathed a sigh of relief before shouting at the bandits, “We can do this the hard way or the easy way.”

The gang didn’t respond with words—instead, bullets started flying and the ground around the herd of cattle erupted into chaos.

Between the muzzle flashes and glints of metal revolvers and rifles, it was hard for Micah to see anything.

After a moment, he caught his bearings and started to fire back, but things weren’t looking good for the inexperienced ranchers. They weren’t used to being shot at and they weren’t trained for combat.

Horses were panicking from the thunderous noise and Micah’s ears began to ring.

A gun was pointing at Wyatt. Micah shouted at his brother. “Get down!”

Wyatt moved too late. Maybe Micah’s words weren’t even heard.

Micah’s heart stopped as Wyatt took a hit in the chest. Micah didn’t know exactly where, but his brother dropped like a bag of rocks.

A pit formed in Micah's stomach. He had to get to his brother and save him somehow.

He started to rush that direction, but a burst of gunfire directed his attention to the men trying to pin him down with covering fire.

It was too dangerous to run sideways on a battlefield, much better to run toward the enemy or away from him. He frowned and then something snapped.

Micah popped his head up and started firing at the gang. He didn't care much if he hit them, he just wanted to shoot something.

These men were going to take more from him if he gave them a chance. They had been the cause of insecurity and strife in his family and had destroyed other homes.

He couldn't let this stand. They would face justice, somehow.

The other ranchers around seemed to feel the same way. No one else had taken a hit as of yet.

They could still win this, but Micah couldn't get to his brother, and there was no way to know if the man was even still alive.

Micah just had to keep firing.

Annie's heart jumped to her throat. Wyatt had been hit.

Bullets were still flying, but she started to do some calculating in her head. She could probably dart from tree to tree and get to her brother-in-law safely.

There would be risks, but there were risks with anything in life.

Micah would be mad at her, and Wyatt had been awful to her.

There were a thousand reasons not to save the man. Wyatt didn't even like her.

He barely tolerated her most days and outright hated her sometimes. It never ended well.

It was a selfish thought, but she knew that if Wyatt died, Micah would probably inherit the land. Wyatt would be gone and they would be free of the pain the older son had brought upon herself and her husband.

As soon as those thoughts crossed her mind, she knew they were wrong. Wyatt was a human being her husband loved, and he deserved to live.

Just because he was awful and foul most of the time didn't mean that he had to die for that crime.

She bit her lip, preparing to burst in motion. She had to help Wyatt. Nothing else mattered. No one else would be able to get to him.

She wondered if she should yell at Micah to protect her, but decided it would be better if she tried not to draw attention to herself as she moved.

She made it to the next tree without being seen. The gunfire sounded louder as she kept moving closer and closer.

Every step seemed to take forever. The gunshots kept ringing out. Annie had to stop about halfway there to steel her nerves again.

She had to get to Wyatt. The man was in deep trouble and she was already committed to this course of action.

One last motion. She could actually make it there.

Her heart pounded in her ears, almost drowning out the sound of the bullets flying around her.

She darted in and grabbed Wyatt under his arms, starting to pull him. Wyatt looked bewildered, but when he laid eyes on Annie he started to help her, kicking his feet to get them moving a little faster.

They got behind the closest tree and Annie helped him to his feet.

“We need to move further out,” she ordered.

He still looked confused. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting you out of there.” Annie gave an exasperated sigh. “I would really appreciate it if you saved the arguments until we got out of this area.”

Wyatt rolled his eyes and let her help him move. They couldn’t dart from one tree to the other as quickly as she had before.

That worried her, but somehow they managed to make it safely to the tree she was hiding behind before. She eased Wyatt down to sit against the tree.

“Let me have a look at that wound.”

Wyatt frowned at her. “You should have just left me there.”

“You would have been killed.” Annie shook her head, feeling a little guilty about having considered it.

Wyatt sighed. “Why did you come for me? You could have been shot and Micah would never have recovered.”

“I had to do what was right. I wasn’t going to leave you out there.” Annie shook her head and started to dig through the saddlebags of the horse that she had tied near the tree.

She produced a few fairly clean rags. “These should work.”

“I’ll be fine.” Wyatt tried weakly to push her away.

“Stop being so stubborn about everything.” She tsked at him. “Just stop fighting. I’m trying to help you.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Don’t be like that.” Annie shook her head. “Let me see the wound. I can help you.”

Wyatt frowned, but put his arms down. “Fine, but it was stupid of you to even get me. You should have just left me there.”

“I wasn’t just going to leave you there to die. I could do something to help, so I did it. I knew both of you would think it was stupid and I shouldn’t have taken the risk, but it was the right thing to do.”

Wyatt groaned as she started to dab at the blood.

Annie got back up and walked back to the horse, pulling a canteen out of the saddlebag. She had enough water to get back, but she could afford to be a little thirsty if it meant she could keep Wyatt's wound from getting infected.

She knelt next to Wyatt and dabbed some water onto a rag.

He winced as she peeled back his shirt.

"I'm sorry." She tried to move slower.

"Just do it quickly. I'd rather have more pain faster than less pain slower."

She nodded and ripped the shirt off of the congealing blood on his shoulder. "I don't think it hit anything vital."

"It hurts like a beast."

"Ever been shot before?"

Wyatt shook his head. "Can't say I make a habit out of getting shot."

"Could have fooled me," Annie laughed.

"What does that mean?" Wyatt panted, closing his eyes as she started to clean the blood off the bullet hole. He was in pain, but he didn't scream. Annie respected that.

"Oh, just making a joke about the way you treated me." She shrugged, paying careful attention to his face as she worked.

"I think it went right through your shoulder. I have to do something," she warned him.

"You probably aren't going to like it."

"What are you going to do?"

“I’m going to clean out the inside.”

“How?”

“I don’t know how to explain it.” She pulled her handkerchief out of her pocket and wet it down from the canteen. “Do you have any whiskey on you?”

Wyatt nodded, his face contorted with pain as he shifted to pull a flask out of his boot.

She was grateful for that. “This is going to hurt.”

“It’s okay. I can take some pain.”

“I can’t say I won’t enjoy this a little bit,” she tried to joke.

Wyatt laughed weakly. “I don’t even know why you saved me after the way I treated you.”

“Because you’re family,” Annie explained. She hoped he stopped asking these questions because all she could think about was the fact that she almost didn’t save him.

Wyatt frowned. “I haven’t exactly been treating you like family.”

She sighed. “I know. But I’m still a person and so are you. Micah loves you, and that means I would put myself at risk to protect you, too.”

“You don’t really consider me family, do you? I’m Micah’s family.”

“And I’m Micah’s family, too.” She shook head. “You don’t have to agree with family to be family. In fact, families argue more than strangers.”

She smiled at him. “I like to think that someday you’ll consider me family, as well.”

Wyatt nodded. "Thank you for saving me."

Annie finished cleaning out the wound by threading the whiskey-soaked handkerchief through the bullet hole. Wyatt yelled in pain as she did it.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you, but it has to be done."

Wyatt had a grimace on his face as he nodded. "I know, but that doesn't make it hurt any less."

She frowned. "I know it doesn't. I think you'll be all right. Let me pack this wound up. It shouldn't hurt as much."

"Good. I don't know how much more I could take." He was breathless.

Annie felt a little sorry for him as she started to bandage him up as well as she knew how. She wasn't trained as a nurse or a doctor, so the work she did looked like a mess.

She decided not to comment on it. She just finished the job and peeked around the tree to try to see what was going on.

The gunfire was slowing down. That meant one side was losing. She hoped it was Micah on top of this situation.

"How's it going out there?" Wyatt didn't move at all.

"It looks like most of the bandits have fallen, but there's one..." She broke off before she finished. Instead, a scream filled her lungs.

Wyatt started, trying to climb up.

Annie couldn't say anything. She had just seen a bandit swing his gun toward Micah. Her husband was in danger.

She had to fight the urge to rush out there and try to help him. She would only get in the way. There was nothing she could do to help in

time, other than scream.

Micah fired a single shot, managing to land a bullet in the bandit's arm. The bandit stumbled back, falling to his knees. It was just an arm shot, but it must have hurt.

Wyatt fell back down. "What happened?"

"It's okay. Micah didn't get hit."

"Good." Wyatt closed his eyes and leaned back against the tree.
"That's good."

Micah walked with purpose to where he could see Annie as she poked her head around the tree. He had watched her drag his brother to safety and he couldn't have been prouder of her.

She was a good woman who did the right thing even when it would be easier not to.

He wouldn't have blamed her if she hadn't saved Wyatt, but the fact that she had put herself at risk to pull his brother from danger just made her more of an angel in his eyes.

He rounded the tree and Annie threw her arms around his neck. He grinned at her. "I'm so proud of you."

"I'm just glad I could help." Annie tried to play it off. "I could get to him when you couldn't."

"I know. You didn't have to do that."

Micah glanced toward Wyatt.

His brother looked ashamed, and Micah felt a little smug about his wife saving him. She had proved his every accusation wrong.

But it had put her at risk, and that was dangerous. He didn't like the thought of her being hurt or killed.

Annie frowned. "You both keep telling me that, can we all just be

happy that we all survived?”

Micah grinned and pulled her around, picking her up by the waist to swing her around. “I think I can arrange that.”

He planted a deep kiss on her lips. They had been through so much and made it out alive somehow. He couldn’t believe that his life was so perfect.

Annie made him happier than he had ever been. He loved his family and he loved Wyatt. He loved the memory of his first family and Jack.

He loved all those people, but with Annie, it was different. She was his companion for life, someone he had promised to care for until death finally claimed him.

She would always be around. He had such faith in her.

Even with all that faith, he was constantly surprised by her strength.

As he pulled away from the kiss, he found her staring into his eyes.

The rest of the world disappeared. The only other person was Annie. She had become something more than one person should have ever been.

He hugged her tightly to his chest. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“I was so worried about you,” Annie admitted.

“Probably not as worried as I was about you.” Micah put her down and ran his hand across her cheek, pushing her hair back.

“Are you two going to do this the whole way back?” Wyatt grumped.

Micah snapped his attention to his brother. “I’m glad you’re alive, too.”

Wyatt nodded. "And I think I owe you both an apology."

Annie frowned. "You don't have to worry about that right now. Just focus on getting better."

"I need to do this. After everything I've done, you've done so much for the ranch. You gave up so much for us. And we'll never be able to pay you back.

"I'm sorry for distrusting you." Wyatt shifted against the tree. He was clearly uncomfortable, wincing and grimacing with every single movement.

Micah rocked back on his heels. "That was more than distrust, Wyatt."

Annie chided him, "It's fine. It's the nicest way to put that."

"I don't think he should worry about being nice to himself." Micah shook his head.

"He acted like a fool and treated you like a monster. All you ever did was try to help the ranch—"

Wyatt interrupted Micah. "I'm trying to say that I know that now. I should have been treating you both like family all along."

Annie sighed. "We can talk about this when we get you back to the house. Right now, we should probably start dealing with the cattle. Can you ride, Wyatt?"

"I think I'll be able to. I feel a lot better after you bandaged me up."

"I didn't do a great job." Annie looked over her work.

She was right—the bandages were functional, but they were messy and the blood was already starting to show through.

"You did just fine. I don't think I would have ever cleaned it out if it

wasn't for you doing that."

Micah cocked an eyebrow. "You cleaned it out?"

"He had some whiskey. It wasn't perfect, but I was able to get most of the dirt out. Hopefully it doesn't get infected."

"How clean were the rags?"

She sighed heavily, and Micah stayed quiet.

Wyatt shrugged then winced. "I don't know, but she used what we had."

"I got them out of the saddlebags, so they probably weren't that clean. I used a handkerchief to clean out the inside of the wound, though."

"That hurt," Wyatt put in.

Micah winced. It sounded so painful. A cloth going through a wound like that created a visceral reaction in his gut. He had to fight back the urge to gag even thinking about it.

"I couldn't ever imagine doing something like that."

"Annie really surprised me. The blood didn't seem to faze her at all," Wyatt recalled proudly.

Annie beamed. "I read about it in a book. It sounded pretty gross, but I was more worried about Wyatt than I was about the blood and gore."

It seemed the fight had brought Wyatt and Annie together. Micah was happy about that, but he still wanted to admonish his brother for his previous behavior.

He probably should have just accepted the apology, but he didn't do that. Instead, he dragged Wyatt down the entire list of sins. There was

a lot to work out.

It took time, and while Wyatt talked about how much better he was going to do after all of this, they climbed up on the horses and started to lead all their stolen cattle back home.

There were a lot of other stolen goods in the house, as well. People started passing things out, making sure everything was going back to the right place.

Several people gave small pieces to Micah and Annie, thanking them for letting them find their belongings.

Once Micah and Wyatt had finished their discussion the air had cleared, becoming easier to breathe.

Annie worked hard, learning how to herd the cows with the brothers.

“You’re taking to ranch life like a pig to mud,” Wyatt pointed out with a laugh.

“That’s one way to put that.” Annie smirked.

Micah shook his head, chuckling softly. “You two suddenly became fast friends.”

“It happens when you save a man’s life.” Annie shrugged.

“Of course. I promised I was going to do better. Annie is family, after all.”

She nodded. “And as long as we’re being honest about our sins, I have something to admit.”

Micah turned to her. “What is it?”

“I almost left him there. It wasn’t because I was afraid or anything.”

"I wouldn't have blamed you if you did." Wyatt shook his head.

Micah took a moment to ponder the thoughts that must have been rushing through her mind over that all.

Wyatt had been awful to her. It was perfectly natural that she would consider leaving Wyatt to whatever fate befell him.

He looked at his wife. She seemed ashamed of herself for feeling that way.

Micah sighed. "It's normal to feel that way, Annie. Don't beat yourself up over it."

She nodded slowly, chewing on her lip. "I'm sorry I couldn't do anything else. How many of the other ranchers were hurt?"

"We only had two others with small injuries. We outnumbered the bandits, so it worked to our advantage. We also caught them by surprise."

They talked it out all the way back to the ranch and then put the cattle up. Everyone was exhausted.

Beatrice came out of the main house, looking thrilled until she saw Wyatt. She whisked the man inside, telling Annie and Micah to go home and take a nap.

She would look after the cattle once she'd made sure Wyatt was taken care of.

Annie didn't follow those instructions, keeping Micah up with her as they got all the animals fed and provided them with plenty of clean water.

Even with the extra work, Micah was the happiest he had ever been in his life. They would never have been able to do this without her. She had saved the ranch.

Annie would never give up.

He loved that about her.

Micah hooked the pitchfork into the pile of hay and flipped it over into the wheelbarrow. Wyatt was on the other side of the haystack, humming as he worked.

Micah was still having trouble getting over the switch in Wyatt's personality since he had been shot. It was like his brother had suddenly grown an understanding of what family really meant.

"I think I'm moving faster than you," Wyatt teased.

Micah smiled. "You probably are, but it doesn't matter much as long as the cows are fed."

"You want to go handle the water and I'll finish up this part?"

"I've almost got this full. Let me finish and I'll meet you over there."

"Sounds good."

Micah rushed through the project. Annie was waiting for him at home and he didn't like to make her wait.

He was finished watering the animals by the time Wyatt had hauled the feed to the troughs. Micah wiped his hands clean. "That looks pretty good."

"It looks delicious. I think I'll take a bite myself." Wyatt picked up a piece of hay and started to chew on one end.

Micah wrinkled his nose in disgust and then laughed. "What's come over you?"

"Oh, nothing at all. I'm just having fun."

"I think you're sick or something. You've had more fun in the past month than you've ever had in your entire life."

"I wouldn't say that." Wyatt shook his head. "I just didn't let you see me having fun. I remember having lots of fun with Pa."

"I never saw a bit of that." Micah shook his head. "I'm happy to see it now."

Wyatt nodded.

It felt like they were real brothers, finally. There was love on the ranch, and Micah was finally feeling comfortable around his brother.

Wyatt believed in the family that had formed on the ranch. Nobody felt like a stray anymore.

They were so lucky to have this life and everything that it had to offer.

When they were finished, Micah rode back to the house for lunch. He hadn't gone to the main house for lunch in a long time.

Annie had become quite the cook in the year she had been at the ranch.

In fact, she excelled at any work on the ranch. The woman could even herd the cattle. She rarely did that chore, but would come out and help if people needed her.

He still felt his heart skip a beat as he approached the house. Annie was very much the love of his life.

She came out to meet him on the porch, a basket over one arm.

Micah raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to go on a picnic?"

"I was hoping we could go eat in that field of wildflowers."

"You want to go back there? It's been a while and every time we go there it rains."

"I think it would be perfect." She grinned.

He took note of her. She seemed to be glowing with excitement. It took his breath away and he couldn't respond because he was staring at her beautiful face.

She cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry?" Micah straightened up.

"Do you think we could go?"

"If you don't mind getting caught in the rain on the way back."

She laughed. "I don't think I'd mind that at all. But can you take the extra time?"

"I think I can arrange it." Micah held his arm out for her.

She took his arm and he walked her down the steps to the horse, then helped her into the saddle. She didn't really need the help, but he still liked lifting her up.

She giggled, and he puffed out his chest as his smile beamed before he climbed up with her.

They shared a lovely ride through the ranch to the spot they had found the first day he was teaching Annie how to ride.

There were a lot of memories in that spot. There had been storms, but it had always ended up with them stronger.

It had become a part of their lives, a spot preserved. Micah had prevented the cattle from grazing there by building a fence around it.

He had plans to put up a gazebo soon, but that would come later, probably in the winter when there were fewer chores to do.

Annie laid down a blanket the moment they arrived.

Micah moved around to help, but she had finished by the time he unloaded the basket. "Look at you."

"I know you still have some chores this afternoon."

"I can take some time off with you every so often. I'm sure Wyatt would understand if I didn't show up."

Annie laughed loudly. "I'm sure he would, but let's not do that yet."

He frowned. "You seem pretty confident about me going back to work this afternoon. Is something wrong?"

She shook her head. "No, I've just been thinking about the future."

"Our future looks amazing, Annie. Everything is going to be just fine, I promise." He wrapped his arms around her waist.

She grinned at him. "It will be, I'm sure. I made sandwiches."

"What kind?" Micah was completely distracted by the prospect of food. It had been a long hard morning on the ranch and Annie made his favorite sandwiches.

"Egg and cheese, toasted in butter. And I have some sliced cucumbers."

“That sounds delicious. I can’t wait.”

Annie pulled out of his arms and started to pull the food out of the basket.

Soon, they were both sitting on the blanket enjoying the delicious meal. It was simple, but amazing.

Annie worked hard to make sure Micah always felt safe and cared for. He wouldn’t trade her for anything.

He was glad she hadn’t traded this life away, either.

After they ate, Annie laid her head in his lap.

Micah idly played with her hair, running his fingers through the golden strands and twisting it between his fingers.

She smiled and closed her eyes. He watched her face for a moment as she completely relaxed in his presence.

“Did you want to come out here just to take a nap?”

She shook her head. “That’s not it at all. I just wanted to spend some time with you.”

“You picked a very romantic spot to do it.”

“I know I did. I wanted to talk about our future and I thought this would put you in a good mood for it.”

Micah frowned. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

She nodded.

Micah was worried. It could be anything. But Annie seemed happy, so he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to feel about the information he didn’t have.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“I’m waiting for the right moment.” She shrugged, her shoulders rubbing against his leg. He kept playing with her hair as she moved, but he was feeling tense.

Then, she reached up and took his hand. “I think the future looks amazing.”

“Everything’s coming up roses for us.” He nodded, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. The way she was talking was leading to something.

He wished she would just come out and say it. “Is something wrong?”

“I already told you that nothing’s wrong.” She shook her head. “Don’t worry. It’s good, I promise.”

“What’s good?” He tilted his head, his hand squeezing hers.

“The news.”

“Are you going to make me keep asking for whatever you’re thinking about?”

She laughed. “I’m trying to figure out the right way to tell you.”

“The right way to tell me what?”

She was still beating around the bush. He didn’t know what to think about that. Whatever news it was, she rarely had any trouble talking to him about anything.

They shared every aspect of their lives. They spoke candidly every night.

But now there was something she didn’t know how to say.

“Is it about your parents?”

“It’s about parents, but not mine.”

Micah frowned. “I don’t get it.”

“*We’re* going to be parents.”

“What?” Micah started.

She took his hand and put it against her stomach. He couldn’t feel anything moving in there. She paused, and Micah held his breath.

She spoke quietly. “I’m pregnant, Micah.”

“What was that?” He couldn’t believe his ears.

“I’m expecting.”

“We’re going to have a baby?”

She nodded. “We’re going to be parents.”

Annie had to quickly get out of the way, because Micah was jumping up and down for joy. He couldn’t believe it. This was every dream they had shared for the past year come true.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.” She nodded, sitting back up and grinning at him.

“I can’t believe this. It’s amazing. I’ll have to get a nursery ready. And we’ll have to add more bedrooms to the house.”

“We have the bedrooms already.” She laughed. “I don’t think we need to add more rooms just yet.”

“But we’re going to have a dozen children.”

“A dozen, are you sure about that?”

“And I hope they all look just like you.”

“I don't know about that, this child's father is a pretty handsome man,” she countered.

He picked her up and swung her around for a kiss. His life had become a dream, everything perfect.

He worked hard and came home to love. He joked with his brother, and Beatrice was still a member of their adoptive family.

This was what he had dreamed of as a child, and he had come so far. Annie had made all of that happen with her fierce demeanor. The woman was absolutely unstoppable.

She had changed the entire ranch.

The kiss lasted for a long time, and then they talked. Micah knew he wasn't going to make it back to help Wyatt do the afternoon or evening chores.

He would have to share the good news with them. They would understand that this was one of those days that he couldn't leave Annie.

They were going to increase the size of their family, becoming something more than they once were.

This was his life and he wouldn't trade it for all the money in the world.

Seven years had passed on the ranch. The spring air brought the smell of wildflowers from right outside, and Annie breathed in the scent as she climbed out of bed.

Micah was still sleeping. The man had been up late fixing a fence that a spring storm had knocked down.

She decided to let him sleep in for a few more minutes and made her way down the hall. Her bare feet barely made a sound on the smooth wood floors.

She started to light the lanterns and she walked through the house. The sun would be up soon, but she didn't want to walk around in the dark until that point.

She had things to do that morning and the first step was to get people awake and moving. Then she would cook breakfast for the entire house.

It was a duty that she relished. She took a few moments here and there to think about just how lucky she was.

Some days, she still couldn't believe that this was her life. This was one of those mornings as she padded down the hall to the second bedroom.

She silently opened the door to peek at the children sleeping in two identical beds. The girls were born a bit over six years ago and they

were both vibrant and bold and strong, just like their parents.

They had Micah's eyes and her hair. It was a beautiful combination, almost unearthly in nature.

She padded into the room and shook the girls awake. They greeted her with hugs and kisses, drawing laughter out of Annie as the children started to joke around right away.

"You two always wake up so happy."

The girls climbed out of their beds. They had been sharing a room their entire lives. It was one of the joys of having twins.

Micah had built another two bedrooms onto the house over the years, but they had yet to be blessed with more children. It wasn't for lack of trying, however.

"It's a good morning. What's for breakfast?"

"Bacon and eggs."

"Yummy. Is it Sunday?"

"It is Sunday." She nodded.

The girls jumped up and down for joy. She wished she had the energy of her children.

She grinned. "Want to go wake up Daddy?"

The kids bounced out of bed and ran to Annie and Micah's bedroom. They jumped onto the bed, waking Micah up with a start.

Soon, everyone dissolved into a fit of laughter. Eventually, Annie had to excuse herself to start on breakfast.

Bacon sizzled on that Sunday morning. It was the rare morning that

they had meat on the breakfast table. Slaughtering enough pigs to have it regularly was out of the question.

They did always have plenty of eggs. Annie had built a second chicken coop because they had so many more chickens born.

She loved to raise her chickens and made some money selling them in town to other ranchers that needed the extra animals.

She left the food in the oven to stay warm and headed back to help the children dress while Micah set the table for six. They always had company for breakfast.

Beatrice and Wyatt had been coming over every morning since the twins were born. They relished their roles as aunt and uncle, always making the extra time.

By the time the girls stomped out of their room, Beatrice was already letting herself in and handing a basket over to Micah. "Put those on the table for me, will you?"

Micah tried to peek under the cloth, but Beatrice slapped his hand away. "That's a surprise."

Annie laughed. "It's got to be good if Beatrice is keeping it a secret."

Everyone moved to the table to sit down. Wyatt was grinning at the twins.

Both girls hopped onto his lap, one on each knee.

"Look at you two. Getting so big. You must have grown a whole foot since I saw you last," Wyatt teased them.

"You just saw them yesterday." Annie admonished him jokingly.

The girls sounded off in agreement. "Yeah, Uncle Wyatt. What are you talking about?"

“I’m talking about how big my lovely nieces are getting. Soon they’ll be out-working all of us.”

Giggles started, they filled the room. The girls loved joking around with their Uncle Wyatt and Wyatt always had some sort of joke for them, even if some of them were recycled.

He had told Annie that he remembered this sort of thing from his father.

Annie wished she’d had a chance to meet Jack. He was such an important member of this family that three of the women on the ranch would never have a chance to meet.

Micah started to dish up breakfast while Annie poured coffee and milk into six glasses. Beatrice finally pulled the cover off the basket, revealing fresh donuts.

Annie gasped. “Really?”

“I traded some of the extra eggs yesterday for some sugar.”

“You must have gotten up so early to do this.” Annie shook her head. “I can’t believe you would do something like this.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Beatrice’s eyes glittered with joy.

Everyone was so happy about breakfast. It was their family, a moment shared between everyone that made them all closer. Time passed, and the times only got better.

They had gone through a few hard periods, but they managed to make it through it all together.

Beatrice may have officially been a hired hand, but she was the mother of everyone there on the ranch, leading the way and breaking up the spats when they cropped up.

Wyatt had even started courting a young lady in town, potentially starting a family of his own soon. Annie hadn't met her yet, but she looked forward to the moment that they became serious enough for Wyatt to bring her out to the ranch.

The girls jumped up and quickly got themselves some of the breakfast sweets.

Beatrice pushed a few more on everyone's plates.

"You're going to make me fat." Annie laughed.

"That's a trap, Micah. Don't say anything." Beatrice held a hand up to stop Annie's husband from saying anything.

Wyatt burst into laughter and nearly choked on his eggs.

"I didn't say it as a trap." Annie waved her fork at Beatrice. "I'm just saying that you spoil us."

"You make breakfast for everyone every morning. It saves me a lot of work. This is the least I can do for you all."

Micah shook his head. "We appreciate it, but you don't owe us anything. We're all family. This is what family does."

It had taken a long time for them all to come together as a family, but eventually it had happened—though few of them were related by blood.

Wyatt and Micah were family by adoption, and it had taken decades for them to become the brothers that Jack had hoped for them to be.

He was mentioned every day, though, as a reminder of what they would have to keep working to maintain. They had grown closer.

Wyatt hardly grumped at anyone anymore. His entire demeanor had changed, becoming kinder.

Everyone was happy and making plans for the day. The girls were going to help Annie out in the garden, then help her go hunt down some wild onions.

Those were amazing in the soup that Annie had planned for dinner that evening.

It was going to be a peaceful day, work in the morning then not much in the afternoon. Annie and Micah intended to share a nice hot meal and then play cards with the rest of the family.

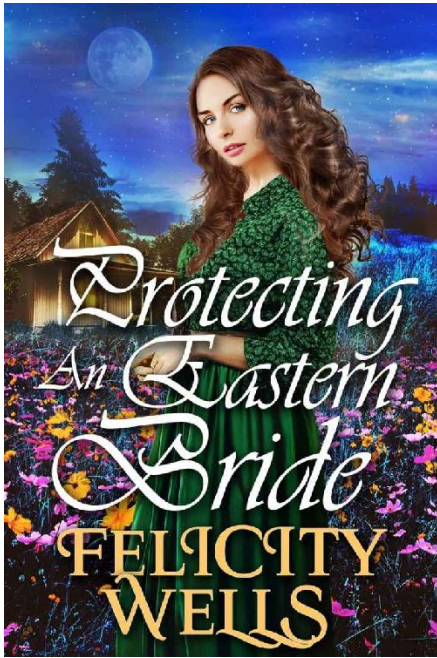
This had become a weekly habit. There were times they had to miss the get-together, but they always tried to make it up.

As everyone got up to leave and take care of their tasks for the day, Annie thought about how lucky she was to have this life. She wouldn't trade it for anything.

They had made the ranch into something greater, and even formed a community watch for all the ranchers to work together and prevent more gangs from preying on the animals they shared.

The world was a brighter place for everyone.

Protecting An Eastern Bride



Chapter 1

“W ith hair like this, it’s no wonder I have no prospective suitors,” she grumbled to herself.

Eleanor sat before her looking glass brushing out her long, thick brown hair, trying in vain to tame the unruly locks. Frustrated, she set her brush down and ran her fingers through the curls.

In the mirror behind her, she saw Millie, the household maid, step into her room. Eleanor turned as Millie softly closed the door behind her.

“Millie, I simply cannot get my hair to cooperate,” Eleanor complained. “I never can. Do you know of anything I can do to get these curls out? If I can’t, I’m afraid I’ll be a spinster before long.”

Millie favored her with a smile. She had worked in the household since Eleanor was a young girl, and the way she saw it, Millie had done as much to raise her as her own mother had. Probably even more.

She was a stout woman a couple of inches taller than Eleanor’s lithe five-foot-five frame, with dark hair shot through with gray, but an unlined, ageless face.

Eleanor knew Millie to be an intelligent and clever woman who could be stern, but also incredibly nurturing. She was certainly more maternal than Eleanor’s mother.

“Now, why would you want to go gettin’ rid of these curls?” Millie asked her.

“They’re unmanageable,” Eleanor replied. “I can never get them to do what I want them to do.”

Millie laughed softly. “Sounds like a certain little girl I used to know.”

Eleanor laughed. “I was not that bad.”

“I suppose that depends on which side of the fence you was on,” she replied with a smile and a shrug.

“Now you’re just being silly,” Eleanor said.

“If you say so, Miss Eleanor.” Millie grinned as she rolled her eyes.

They shared a laugh together, then she looked into the mirror again and sighed at the mass of dark curls atop her head. Finally, she did what she always ended up doing, and selected one of her ribbons—red, today—and tied her hair back with it.

More than anything, Eleanor wished she had the sort of hair she could put up in some of the more fashionable and sometimes elaborate styles the ladies of Baltimore society tended to wear.

But she was resigned to the fact that her hair was so thick and curly, tying it back with a pretty ribbon was all she could do.

“Well, you might not think so, but your hair is beautiful, child,” Millie said. “You ought not be tryin’ to hide it away.”

“You sound like my mother,” Eleanor said with a frown.

“When it comes to things like that and bein’ a society woman, your mother’s wise. You might want to listen to her more.”

“I know she certainly thinks I should,” she replied with a small laugh.

“Speakin’ of your mother, she and your father want to see you down in the parlor,” Millie said.

“What? Now?”

Millie nodded. “Yes, child. Now,” she replied. “Now, go on with yourself. Best not keep them waiting.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes as she stood up. She walked over to the full-length looking glass in the corner and studied herself carefully, making sure everything was just so.

Her parents were sticklers about dressing appropriately and always looking your best. Their philosophy was that one should always dress as if one was expecting to receive company.

That was one bit of advice Eleanor always took to heart. She believed that being a lady of high social standing and position, as she was, required her to always be proper, and to observe all formalities and traditions.

After all, Eleanor knew she would one day be like her mother—married to a proper gentleman and in charge of a household. And that meant she had to keep everything just so, to ensure her house was held in high esteem by the rest of society.

And that was when the thought hit her. She turned to Millie, a wide smile on her face as she clasped her hands to her chest.

“Millie, have they found me a proper suitor? Is that what they want to see me about in the parlor?”

The older woman shook her head. “I don’t know, Miss Eleanor.”

“Have they chosen Joseph Welton?”

“I honestly don’t know, child.”

“Oh, please, Millie,” Eleanor begged. “Tell me. Is it Joseph?”

Millie laughed. “Child, I don’t know anythin’. There’s nothin’ for me to tell you,” she replied.

“But if you want to find out, I’d suggest you head on down to the parlor. I’m sure your folks would be happy to answer your questions.”

“Fine.”

Millie continued laughing as Eleanor twirled around and swished out of the room.

As she walked down the hallway, heading for the stairs, Eleanor’s mind swirled with a hundred different thoughts—most of them about the young and handsome Joseph Welton.

Eleanor smiled to herself as she thought about staring into his bottomless dark eyes and the flutter it always put into her heart.

She had flirted shamelessly with him at countless social gatherings, and wanted nothing more than for her parents to betroth her to him.

She knew there were several suitors vying for her hand. But she also knew her father had been working on a business deal with Joseph’s father, Archibald.

Uniting Eleanor and Joseph in matrimony would bring the two families even closer together, which would reap rewards for the stability and the continuity of their business collaborations.

It would only make sense for her parents to agree to a match between her and Joseph, and it was with those thoughts bouncing around in her head, making her feel lightheaded and giddy, that Eleanor descended the staircase.

She walked into the parlor to find her parents sitting in their chairs, side by side in front of the fire, neither of their faces betraying the

slightest hint of emotion.

She walked over and stood beside the hearth, listening to the crackle and pop of the logs as the fire consumed them. Her parents looked at her, both of them with the same inscrutable expression on their faces.

Finally, her father, Rutherford B. Hampton III, cleared his throat and leaned forward in his seat, his eyes fixed to Eleanor's.

"No sense in beating around the bush about things, I suppose," he said, his voice deep and booming.

"We have found you a match, Eleanor. A suitable and proper man that we are going to betroth you to."

Eleanor felt her stomach lurch, but a smile crawled across her face. She was practically bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, a white-hot fire of excitement coursing through her veins as she awaited the words she had longed to hear for what seemed like a lifetime already.

Her mother gave her a small smile, perhaps encouraging her to maintain her composure, like a properly dignified lady should always do.

"We have decided that you are to be betrothed to Archibald Welton," her father said.

Joy bloomed in her chest and, briefly, the smile on her face stretched from ear to ear. But then the words her father had spoken sunk in and her smile faded quickly.

The joy that had blossomed suddenly withered on the vine. Eleanor looked at her father, not sure that she'd heard him right. Perhaps he had misspoken and uttered the father's name, rather than the son's.

"Excuse me, Father?" she asked quietly. "I don't believe I heard you correctly."

Her father leaned his large, bulky frame back in his chair, and the wooden seat groaned beneath him.

For a long moment, the only sound in the parlor was the snapping of the logs that were aflame, and the air around her suddenly felt oppressively heavy.

“You heard me correctly, Eleanor,” he said gruffly. “You’re to be wed to Archibald Welton a week from today.”

“But, Father, he’s... he’s older than you,” she objected. “Surely you can’t mean for me to marry somebody near old enough to be my grandfather?”

“If we want to seal this business alliance, then I do mean for you to marry him. Archibald’s a decent man. He’ll treat you well,” her father said.

She had met the man on only a couple of occasions—social functions her parents had hosted. And in those times, she had learned that he was not a kind man.

He was brusque and abrasive. He seemed to care little about the thoughts, feelings, or opinions of women, and seemed to treat them as little more than vessels to use for his pleasure.

Eleanor very much doubted that he would treat her well.

“Father, I cannot marry this man—”

“You can, and you will,” he cut her off.

“Eleanor, dear, let’s not be dramatic about this. Archibald is a man of wisdom and wealth. He will provide a good home for you.

“He will provide you with position and esteem,” her mother added in that soothing tone that never failed to grate on Eleanor’s nerves.

“And your marriage will provide for the stability and wealth of this family,” her father noted.

His words cut right to the point of it all, and Eleanor was suddenly realizing it. When she was younger, her mother had often spoken to her of her duty as a daughter to help provide for and secure the family’s future and legacy.

Eleanor had pretended to understand it back then, but it was only now that the words struck home. It was only now that she realized what it was her mother had meant.

By securing the family’s future and legacy, it meant adding to their already considerable wealth with whatever Archibald Welton was offering for her hand in marriage.

For her father, this was merely one more business transaction, just one more way to add worth and wealth to his business ventures.

And, recalling her mother’s words, Eleanor realized her duty to the family was to enter into a marriage that would do those very things.

Eleanor wanted to marry for love. She wanted to be devoted to somebody and have their devotion in return. She wanted to wake up every day and smile and laugh.

She wanted to be so in love, she could not bear to be apart from her husband. She’d dreamed of having a husband who would fall all over himself to make her happy and prove his love to her, just as she would do whatever it took to prove her love to him.

To Eleanor, marriage wasn’t supposed to be about securing the family legacy. It was supposed to be about love. Period.

“I want my marriage to mean more than that, Father. I want to be in love with—”

“You’ve always had such romantic notions in your head, dear,” her

mother interrupted. "But those notions are fit for a child, not for a grown woman. It is time to grow up and do your duty for your family."

"Mother, I—"

"Enough!" her father roared, standing up so suddenly, he nearly knocked the chair over.

Eleanor shrank back, pressing herself against the wall, wilting before his fury. Her father had a terrible temper and it terrified her. It was one reason Eleanor usually never pushed him very hard about most anything.

It helped, of course, that most of the time, her parents never seemed to take much notice of or interest in her. It kept her out of their eye, and therefore, well away from their wrath.

But this was different. This was her future, her life, they were talking about. And Eleanor believed with everything in her that she should have some say in it.

She certainly didn't believe she should be auctioned off like a piece of livestock, or sold to a man simply for the sake of fostering a business alliance.

Her father stared at her, his eyes blazing with anger. "You will do as we tell you," he sneered. "You will marry Archibald, and you will be a good wife to him.

"That is your duty to this family, and by God, you will do it. Am I understood?"

Eleanor said nothing, her gaze falling to the floor beneath her feet. She felt her eyes stinging as they welled with tears, but she fought to keep them from falling, fearing the sight of them would only further inflame her father's ire.

“I said, am I understood?” he hissed, his voice low and menacing.

Eleanor nodded quickly, an almost automatic reaction she had developed to him whenever he was angry.

“Yes, Father,” she replied, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Good. Then I suggest you start learning how to be gracious,” he growled. “Archibald wants to meet you and formally acknowledge the betrothal tomorrow.”

Without waiting for her to reply, her father stormed out of the room with her mother right on his heels, leaving Eleanor standing alone in the parlor.

Finally, she let the tears fall and gave herself a moment to indulge in them. Her heart thundered in her chest as her stomach folded over on itself.

It was all she could do to keep her legs from giving out under her.

She wiped away the tears and smoothed down her hair as she tried to calm her nerves.

Folding her arms over her chest, Eleanor paced the room, trying to find some way around this—some way to foil her father’s plans and stop this marriage before he could foist her off on a man old enough to be her grandfather.

As she passed by the table, she noticed the newspaper laid out on top of it. The page showed advertisements from men looking for brides.

She stopped to read a few of them, and an idea started to form in her mind.

Eleanor cut a glance at the doorway. She could hear her father speaking loudly, his anger clear, somewhere deeper in the house.

Grabbing a piece of paper and a fountain pen from the desk, she started to scratch out a letter in response to one of the advertisements that had caught her eye.

As she read over what she'd written, Eleanor frowned. She crumpled the piece of paper, dissatisfied with her words, and tossed it into the hearth, watching for a moment as the flames consumed it.

Her mind still spinning, Eleanor grabbed the newspaper and quickly folded it. She tucked it under her arm as she dashed out of the room, a bold, maybe even insane plan forming in her mind.

Chapter 2

“**E**asy, easy,” Sam said.

Luke looked up at him, a frown on his face. “She’s just an old cow.”

Sam walked over to where his ranch hand, Luke, was tending to a wound on the cow’s leg, and stroked the big cow’s neck affectionately. He looked down at Luke, a small frown tugging the corners of his mouth downward.

Luke was a good man who worked hard. He and Sam’s other ranch hand, Zebulin, had worked for Sam for a few years now and had been invaluable in helping get this ranch on its feet. But they often didn’t see things the way he did.

“She’s a livin’ thing, same as us. And she helps in providing for us,” Sam said. “She deserves to be cared for and respected the way we would if we were hurt.”

Luke chuckled to himself. “You’re the only man I’ve ever known who cares for his livestock the way you do.”

A smile flickered across his lips. He knew he did things differently and that some people thought him odd because of it. But he never put much stock in what other people thought of him.

Sam knelt down and took the cow’s forearm from Luke, speaking softly to her. He took a look at the gash, relieved that it wasn’t any worse, but he imagined it was causing the cow some discomfort.

He gently set the leg back down, then rooted around in his bag. He came out with a jar of salve that would ease the pain and help prevent infection.

As Luke watched, Sam gently spread the salve over the wound, making sure to pack it into the cut. After that, he wrapped a clean bandage around the leg to keep the dirt out, lessening the chances of the cow taking an infection.

That done, he stood up and wiped his hands on a rag and turned to Luke. "Grab Zebulin and move the herd down to the south field to graze."

"You got it."

Luke walked off as Sam led the injured cow into the barn and locked her in a stall to recuperate. After feeding and watering her, Sam pulled his hat a bit lower and walked out of the barn.

In the distance, he could see Luke and Zeb on horseback, driving the cattle toward the south field like he'd asked.

He cast a glance over at his house, looking at the framework for the new room he was building. His house had started as a small one-room cabin he'd purchased on his own after his father had passed on.

Since then, he'd been adding more rooms to the original structure, making it larger. For what, he had no idea.

He had no wife and no children, so Sam wasn't sure why he needed all of the rooms and that much space in his home.

Maybe, one day, he'd be able to fill it with a family. But for now, it kept his mind and hands busy, which was something he needed.

Left to his own devices, Sam knew his mind would go places he had no interest in thinking about. Namely, his father and his childhood.

To say it had been rough would have been an understatement. It had been terrible, in point of fact.

But then, Sam figured he wasn't unique in that regard, and dwelling on it was pointless since it wouldn't change anything. All he could do was move forward and leave the past where it belonged.

So, after his father had passed, he'd sold the land and the ranch he'd grown up working, and moved from Kansas to the fertile, open land of the Wyoming territory.

It was a beautiful land and he'd fallen in love with it almost as soon as he'd gotten there. But they were making a big push for statehood and Sam wasn't sure how crazy he was about that.

There was something about living in a land free of all the regulations and rules a governmental body imposed upon people that appealed to him.

The idea of a life lived by the sweat of his brow and the muscles in his back, making it on his own, without interference, suited him right down to his boots.

He pushed those thoughts from his mind, preferring not to waste time or energy thinking about things he couldn't control, and looked at his house.

At some point, Sam knew he was going to have to do something to make the disparate pieces match. The original cabin looked markedly different from what he'd built, almost like he'd taken two houses and mashed them together.

It wasn't necessarily pretty, not like some of the big ranch houses he'd seen, but it was clean and well kept.

Unlike some other unmarried men he knew, Sam refused to live in filth. Keeping his home clean and well ordered was something of a point of pride with him.

Sam walked into the house and grabbed an apple from the larder. The click-clack of nails on the wood floor behind him brought a smile to his face.

He turned to find the tan and white mutt that had adopted him shortly after he'd moved into the original cabin what felt like ages ago. He was a big, strong dog with short hair, floppy ears, and inquisitive eyes.

Sam had taken him in when he'd shown up scrawny and half-starved, feeding and nursing him back to health.

He'd expected the big dog to take off when he was back on his feet, but he'd stuck around, showing a fierce loyalty that Sam appreciated. He'd named him Biscuit and they were inseparable.

"Finally decided to wake up, huh?"

Biscuit sat down and turned his warm brown eyes on Sam, making him chuckle. The dog might not be able to speak, but Sam always knew what he was saying anyway.

He grabbed a chunk of the roasted chicken he had in the cold room and tossed it to Biscuit, who snatched it out of mid-air and happily chomped away.

Laughing softly, Sam took a bite of his apple as he walked past the dog, giving him a scratch behind the ears before heading back outside.

Biscuit was there beside him, licking his lips and looking up at Sam gratefully as they walked the perimeter of the yard. He checked the windbreak fencing that fronted his property.

His gaze drifted up to the sign that hung above the gates: "Double R Ranch." His mind immediately traveled back in time, dredging up the memory of his brother, Reeve, and sending a familiar lance of pain through his heart.

Reeve had died when they were both boys, died protecting Sam. It

was a fact that never failed to cause him pain.

Wanting to honor his brother, Sam had named his ranch after his brother—the Double R stood for Reeve Ridgefield. It was a small, inadequate gesture, but it was the only thing Sam could do.

With their father dead, it wasn't as if Sam could avenge his brother's death. And he certainly wouldn't let himself forget Reeve, or the sacrifice he made.

Naming his ranch after his brother seemed to be the only thing he could do to keep Reeve's memory alive.

Biscuit leaned his big body against Sam's leg, a low growl issuing from his throat. Sam dropped his hand and stroked the dog's neck.

"Easy, boy," he said softly. A moment later, Sam heard the sound of the horse cantering down the road, coming toward his gates.

The road was lined with trees on either side. That screen of trees and brush prevented Samuel from seeing who was approaching until they came to a bend in the road about twenty yards from the gates.

He'd considered cutting down some of those trees many times before, but hadn't ever gotten around to it.

With so many different Indian tribes in the area, not knowing who was coming down the road could be fatal. On the other hand, though, Sam had never had any sort of difficulty with the tribes.

In fact, he'd had a handful of relatively smooth interactions with them and thought their reputation as bloodthirsty savages might have been a bit overblown.

He didn't have to worry, as Wyatt Smith emerged from the trees, riding casually along while singing to himself. Wyatt had a ranch of his own up the road apiece, and was one of the first people Sam had met when he first moved to Prodigal River.

They'd become thicker than thieves from the start. They were similar in temperament and both had a dry sense of humor. Sam and Wyatt were very no-nonsense sorts who'd spent their lives working the land, and shared a similar work ethic.

Wyatt rode into the yard, heading over toward the barn with Sam and Biscuit following behind him. Sam crunched on his apple while Wyatt dismounted.

Biscuit wagged his tail and barked playfully at the visitor. Laughing, Wyatt squatted down, earning wet, sloppy licks to the face.

"All right, all right," Wyatt said as he scratched Biscuit behind the ears.

He stood up and fished a piece of beef jerky out of a pouch on his belt and fed it to Biscuit, who chewed on it happily. Wyatt looked at Sam with a mischievous smirk on his face.

"How ya doin' today?" he asked.

"Doin' fine," Sam replied. "Yourself?"

He nodded and took off his Stetson, wiping his brow with his sleeve before putting the hat back onto his head.

"Good, good," he replied. "Mighty hot today, though."

Sam grinned at him. "Uh huh. Out with it."

"Out with what?" Wyatt replied with an expression of feigned innocence.

"With whatever's got you grinnin' like a fool right now."

"Oh, was I grinnin' like a fool? I was not aware that I was."

"Well, now you are," Sam responded with a chuckle. "So let's hear it."

Wyatt looked off across the sea of green grass and out toward the distant scrubby and craggy mountain peaks.

Halfway between Sam's land and the mountains, the sun glittered upon the surface of the mighty Prodigal River as it cut through the earth in a wide, snaking path like a jagged scar.

The river was responsible not just for the town's name, but served as an important watering hole for those cattle drives heading south toward the ranches down in Colorado.

Sam was fortunate that he'd gotten a plot of land near enough to the river that his own cattle could take water when they felt the need. Not that it wasn't without some difficulty when the Prodigal overflowed its banks.

It had only happened a few times since he'd been there but, not wanting his cattle to be washed away, Sam was ever-vigilant about it.

"I could do with a drink, I think. Somethin' to wash this road dust out of my mouth," Wyatt said.

"You're really goin' to drag this out, ain't ya?"

Wyatt shrugged. "A little liquid refreshment might help grease the rails, as they like to say."

"Yeah, 'they' say a lot. I never liked 'them' all that much," Sam replied. "Come on, then, let's go grease your rails."

After setting Wyatt's horse to feed and water, they walked into the house. Biscuit was on their heels, begging for another piece of jerky with his eyes.

Wyatt chuckled and ruffled the big dog's fur before tossing him a large chunk of the dried meat. Biscuit snapped it out of the air, then went and curled up on the blanket near the hearth, munching away contentedly.

“You know, you take care of that big mutt better than some people take care of their own kids,” Wyatt noted.

“I like that big mutt better than other people’s kids.”

Wyatt laughed as Sam grabbed a pair of cups and the pitcher of lemonade from the cold room, then carried it back out to the table.

Wyatt was leaning back in his chair with his feet perched on the edge of the table, so Sam slapped them off, sending Wyatt lurching forward in his seat.

“Table’s for eatin’. Not for your dirty boots,” he said with a grin.

“I sometimes forget you’re a little fussy like that.”

“You call it fussy, I call it sanitary.”

Sam poured them both a cup of lemonade, then sat down across from Wyatt, who was already taking a long swallow of his.

Wyatt was about as opposite from Sam as they could be. Sam had a lean, trim build that was taut with corded muscle. He had dark blonde hair and blue eyes.

He kept his hair trimmed and his face free of stubble, often leading Wyatt to joke about his baby face.

Wyatt, on the other hand, was a few inches shorter than Sam, and was wide through the shoulders and chest. He was a strong man, with arms thicker than the thighs of most people, hair as dark as a raven’s wing and eyes darker than that.

His face was always well stubbled, but he somehow never managed to grow a full mustache and beard.

About the only thing they had in common was that they were both rugged men with skin that was tawny after being out in the sun as

often as they were.

For all of their exterior differences, and how opposite they were in many different ways, their friendship was deep and true. They held each other in tremendous esteem and had great respect for one another.

In some ways, Wyatt reminded Sam of his brother, Reeve.

“That is delicious lemonade,” Wyatt commented. “You really will make somebody a fine wife one day.”

Sam chuckled. “Glad you approve. Now, out with it.”

“All right, all right. Well, I was down in town today and ran into Mr. Sutter,” he started.

The actual town proper of Prodigal River was almost half an hour’s ride south of Sam’s ranch. He didn’t go into town often, usually only when he had to.

He liked to keep a running list of things he needed, then, on the first of the month, he’d go into town and stock up for the next few weeks. As far as Sam knew, most people who ran ranches on the outskirts of town did the same.

“Anyway, Mr. Sutter had a telegram he was fixin’ to ride out and deliver to you,” Wyatt went on. “And I figured that since I was already headed this way, I’d deliver it for him.”

Sam frowned, a slow, uneasy feeling roiling in his belly. He had no family left and no idea who would be sending him a telegram, but had no trouble believing it was a portent of bad tidings.

In his experience, good news seldom traveled via telegram.

“And? Did you read it?” Sam asked.

“What? Mr. Sutter entrusted me with this important assignment on the one condition that I did not read the telegram and your personal business,” Wyatt said, putting on that expression of feigned innocence again.

“So, you read it.”

“Of course, I read it.” Wyatt grinned. “And I want to know who this Nora Rawlings is. Not only that, I want to know why you haven’t seen fit to mention her before now.”

Sam cocked his head, confusion gripping him tightly. “I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about, Wyatt.”

With a flourish that would make a showman proud, Wyatt produced the telegram from an inside pocket of his vest and slid it across the table.

Sam picked it up and read the strip of paper:

Your wife is on her way Stop Will arrive in Cheyenne, two day’s time Stop Would appreciate your welcome Stop Nora Rawlings Stop

Sam read it several more times before the realization of what it all meant came crashing down on him. He looked up at Wyatt, who seemed genuinely puzzled, but amused by it all.

Sam buried his face in his hands for a moment, trying to gather himself. He finally looked up at his old friend.

“You do know what this is, don’t you?” he asked.

“Sounds like you’ve got a woman who thinks she’s your wife comin’ on out here to see you. That is goin’ to be somethin’ funny to see.”

“This is your fault.”

Wyatt laughed. “How is this my fault?”

“Because the last time we were in town and had a few, you talked me into fillin’ out that mail-order bride advertisement,” Sam said, feeling mortified.

As if the memory had just come back to him, Wyatt roared with laughter, doubling over and slapping his knee like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. Sam sat back, not feeling the slightest bit amused.

It had been a lark, something that seemed funny and like a good idea after a few too many drinks down at the Tambernay Saloon some weeks back.

“What am I goin’ to do, Wyatt?” Sam asked, feeling his panic rising. “I never intended for that advertisement to be answered.”

“Well, I’d suggest buyin’ a bigger lock and maybe buildin’ that fence out there a little bit higher.” Wyatt laughed.

“That ain’t funny, Wyatt.”

“What? I mean, you put that advertisement in. Surely, you knew this could happen at some point.”

“I didn’t, actually. But, at the very least, I would’ve expected that we’d correspond for a bit. Write a few letters back and forth?” Sam gasped, exasperated.

“I never expected to get a telegram tellin’ me she was just showin’ up!”

“That... that’s a might unpredictable, I’ll give you that,” Wyatt agreed with a chuckle.

“I’m bein’ serious, Wyatt. What am I goin’ to do?”

Wyatt shrugged his broad shoulders. “I guess you’re goin’ to need to get ready to receive company. Ready to receive a wife, I should say.”

Wyatt made light of it, but this was like a bomb going off in the middle of Sam's life. He hadn't expected this, didn't even want it.

As Wyatt continued to chuckle, Sam stood up and paced the room, trying to figure out what he was going to do.

At the same time, he was silently kicking himself for letting Wyatt talk him into it in the first place. What had he been thinking?

"Sam."

He stopped pacing and turned to look at Wyatt, his mind racing. "What?"

"It's goin' to be all right. Worst-case scenario is that you two don't get on and she goes back to wherever she came from, and you go on like before," he said.

"But best-case scenario is that you find somethin' you told me you wanted that night we put the advertisement in."

"And what was that? What did I tell you I wanted?" Sam asked, struggling to recall his words.

"Love," Wyatt said simply. "Somebody to love who'd love you back. Why do you think we put that advertisement in the paper in the first place?"

Sam opened his mouth to speak but closed it again, unsure how to reply. The truth was, he had no idea what he'd said.

What Wyatt had just said sounded like something Sam might say, but he didn't remember saying it. The reality, though, was that it didn't matter.

This Nora Rawlings woman was on her way to his place as he stood there trying to get his head on straight about it.

As he looked around the great room of his home, he grimaced. It was clean and tidy, well organized, and well kept. But it was sparse and not very homey.

It was rough and, he thought, definitely not a place for a woman. But, like it or not—ready or not—a woman was coming, with every intention of making this place her home.

And Sam had never before been more terrified of anything in all his life.

If you enjoyed the story so far, you can read the rest [here](#).

A Thank You To My Reader

Dear Reader,

First of all, I would like to thank you for taking some of your precious time to read my book.

It is such an honor to be able to share my stories with you.

As quality is my primary goal, it gives me a great feeling of security and pleasure to know that you finished this book.

Thank You again for making this possible for me!

With Gratitude,

Felicity.